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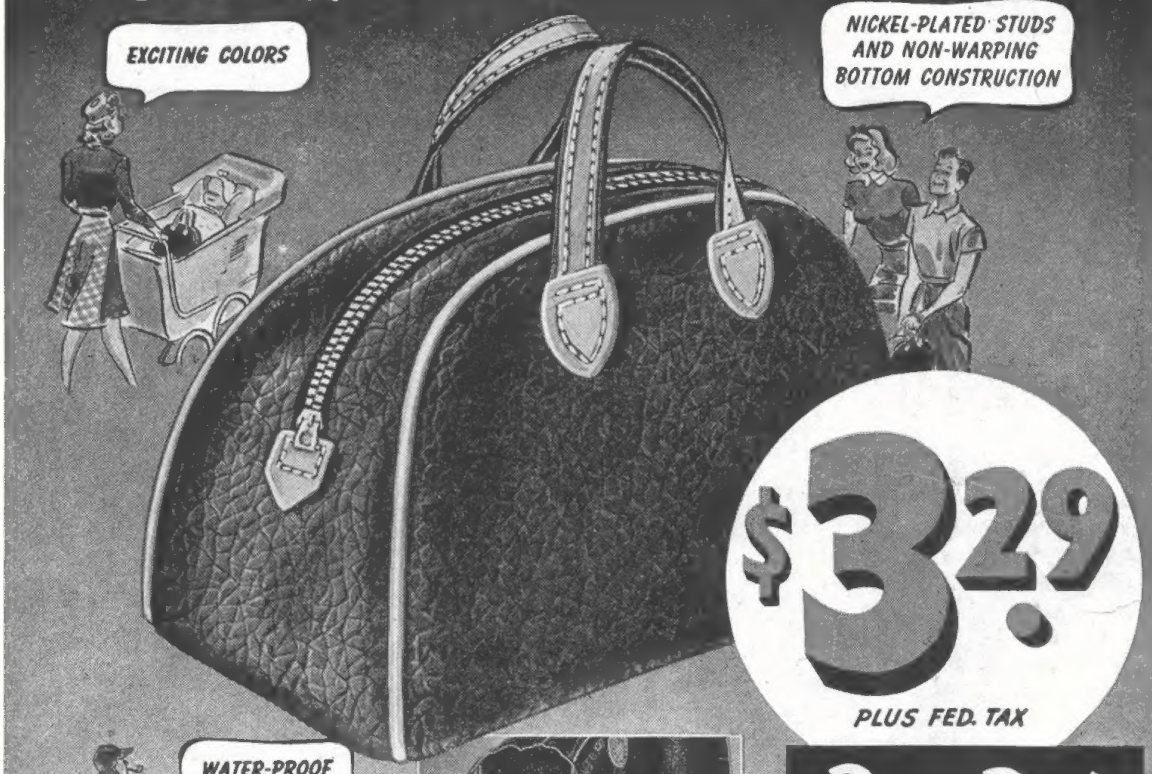
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by Charles N. Heckelmann

Ed Garry rides into a country rocked by killings to add some mighty effective gun thunder of his own to a storm of battle! Follow this fighting lawdog as, with every man's hand arrayed against him, he bucks a grim game of rustling and murder which holds the range in a thralldom of terror! **11**

SHORT STORIES

IN QUEST OF DEATH ***by Harold F. Cruickshank*** **82**
Man and wolf join forces to save a scientist's secret from evil schemers.

THE DIE-HARD ***by Tom Parsons*** **91**
Bounty hunter Hal Bide of Rawhide redeems himself in a blazing showdown.

FEATURES

THE CHUCK WAGON ***by Foghorn Clancy*** **6**
A ranch and rangeland gabfest conducted by a world-famous rodeo expert.

TEXAS LONGHORNS ***by John A. Thompson*** **76**
Cattleman Sam Day holds forth on the habits of those ornery range critters.

MAVERICK'S CHOICE ***by Bill Anson*** **111**
The true story of the Rock Springs bull of the 916 Outfit, in New Mexico.

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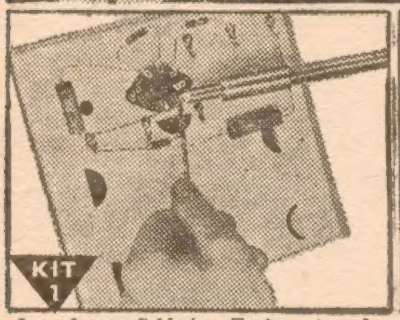

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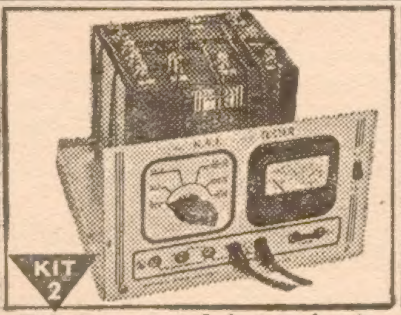

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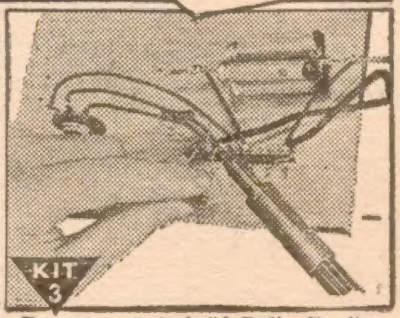

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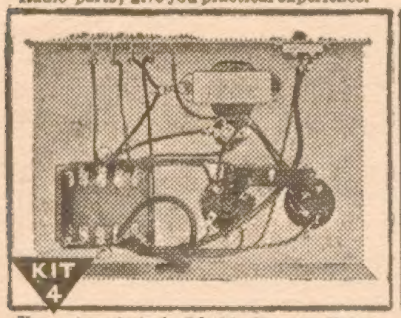

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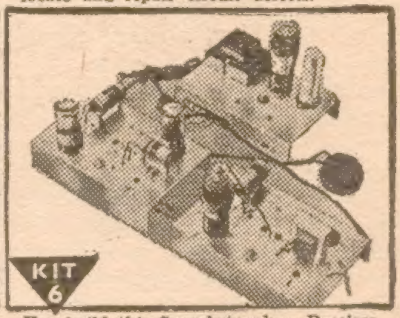

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Conducted By FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HEAR ye, hear ye! We are now banging on the old triangle and yelling "come and get it before we throw it out," so gather 'round the old Chuck Wagon and we will proceed to dish up various and sundry dishes of rangeland and rodeo gossip, and there should be plenty of it as it looks like this will be by far the biggest rodeo season ever.

Hundreds of cowboy contestants are back from the service, and it is surprising how quickly most of these boys have gotten back into riding and roping form after two to four years' layoff. We don't mean by that, that they were on vacation, a trip overseas to the theatres of war was anything but a vacation, but they were out of the rodeo arena and of course out of riding, roping and bull-dogging practice.

Two big rodeos are scheduled for the same time this fall, both called World's Championship affairs. One is at Madison Square Garden, with Gene Autry as co-producer and guest star, and the other at the Chicago Stadium, with Roy Rogers as co-producer and guest star. This should split the talent up so that there will not be too many contestants at either show. Most of the spring rodeos this last spring had too many contestants, which made it hard to furnish enough stock for the contests and it also lessened the number of trials each contestant had during the run of the contests.

The Last Round Up

A grand fellow, rodeo stock contractor, rodeo producer and a great horseman rode on to the last roundup from his ranch near Chugwater, Wyoming, recently. He was Eddie McCarty, aged 58. His death the result of a heart attack.

More than thirty years ago McCarty started in the stock contracting business furnishing stock to rodeos. Later he sold a half interest in the business to his brother-in-law, Verne Elliott, and the firm was known as McCarty and Elliott. Several years ago Elliott bought McCarty's interest and Eddie confined his activities to his ranch for a couple of years, and then started again in the stock contracting business on a smaller scale.

He furnished the stock for Tex Austin's Rodeo in London, England, in 1924, and helped Austin direct the contests. He won the bronc-riding championship at Cheyenne Frontier Days in 1919.

At the first World's Championship Rodeo staged in Chicago, the first week in July, 1919, and just three weeks before he won the championship at Cheyenne, McCarty was sitting on the corral fence at the rodeo, in deep meditation, when he was approached by a fellow from the linotype department of a Chicago newspaper who was on vacation and had entered the bronc riding contest.

McCarty was more or less worried at the moment, for he had drawn for his ride that day "Square Deal," one of the few bucking horses out of the big string he owned that he could not ride. This particular bucker seemed to have McCarty's number and was accustomed to piling Eddie about three out of four times when he attempted to ride the animal.

Hospitality Plus

The newspaper man had not shown up at the drawing that morning and so no horse was drawn for him, and so he set up a howl for a horse, ending it with a slam at western hospitality. This did the trick.

McCarty crawled down off the corral fence held out his hand to the tenderfoot and said, "Pardner, I am a westerner. I am sure that it

(Continued on page 8)

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

was simply an oversight that you did not get a horse to ride in today's contest, and to show you that western hospitality still exists I will be glad to let you have my horse to ride, he's a good horse and ought to put you plumb up in the money."

With profuse thanks, the tenderfoot accepted the horse, retracted what he had said about western hospitality, attempted to ride the bucker and wound up in the local hospital.

"Probably I shouldn't have let him have the horse," said McCarty, "but I was sure looking for someone to give him to, and then I couldn't bear to hear him talk about the lack of western hospitality."

McCarty bought from Col. Eskew, back in 1929, two buckers that became very famous. They were "Midnight" and "Five Minutes to Midnight". For practically six years Midnight was termed unridable as he bucked off practically every cowboy that mounted him. Upon his death cowboys raised a fund and built a monument over his grave, and had engraved upon the monument the following verse:

Underneath this sod lies a great bucking hoss,
There never lived a cowboy that he couldn't toss,
His name was Midnight, his coat black as coal,
If there's a hoss Heaven, please God rest his soul.

McCarty is survived by his widow and five children.

Results at Yakima

The results of the Stensen's Sports Arena Rodeo at Yakima, Washington, in bronc riding were: First, Stub Batlemay; Second, Cecil Bedford: Third, Tom Bride; Fourth, Scotty Bagnell.

Bud Rothrock won the bareback bronc riding, Tom Woods was second, Bud Botta was third and Cecil Bedford fourth. Oran Fore was best man in the calf roping, Buck Abbott took second place, Demase Bergivin was third and Padgett Berry fourth. Arnie Will copped the steer wrestling, Art Merritt was second, Tom Henderson was third and Less Kaum fourth.

Frog McMeans was the speed demon of the wild cow milking, taking first prize, Padgett Berry was second, Demase Bergivin was third and Arnie Will fourth.

Carl Arnold of Buckeye, Arizona, met and defeated Bob Crosby, of Roswell, New Mexico, in a matched steer roping held at Clovis, New Mexico. The purse was $10,000. The weight of the steers ran around 900

(Continued on page 100)

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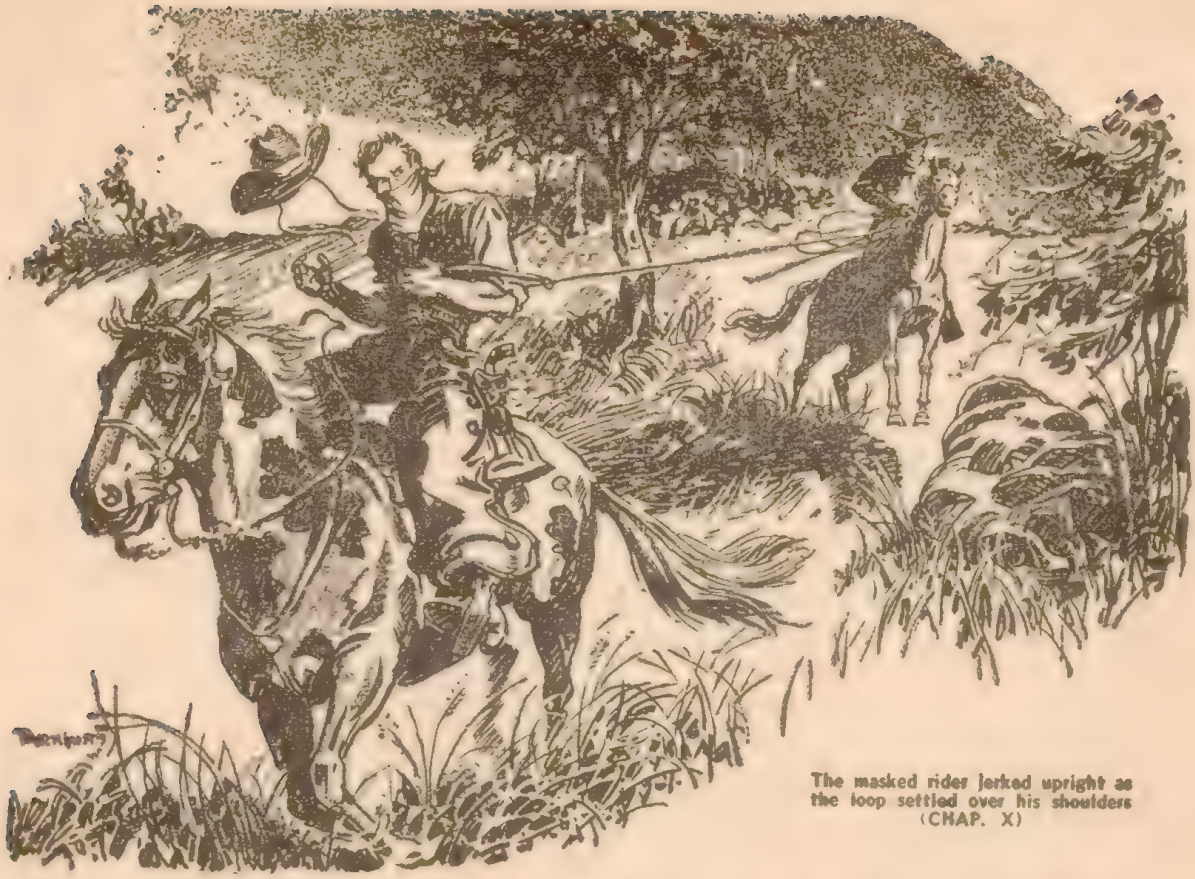


The masked rider jerked upright as the loop settled over his shoulders (CHAP. X)

DEPUTY MARSHAL OF SHADOW HILLS

By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

Ed Garry rides into a country rocked by killings to add some mighty effective gun thunder to a storm of battle!

CHAPTER I

Man of Mystery

ED GARRY tipped his black sombrero far down on his forehead to shield his smoky gray eyes, allowed his shoulders to settle heavily against the red plush seat of the rattling day coach, then turned and stared moodily out of the window.

Outside the night was black and starless. The sage-covered flats drifting endlessly past the window made a pale, indistinct blur against the surrounding darkness. At intervals a shower of sparks, issuing from the locomotive's smoke-stack, painted a ruddy streak across the sky.

Couplings clanked as the four-car train lurched around a curve and the coal-oil lamps, suspended from chains in the ceiling, began to sway back and forth.

With Every Man's Hand Against Him, a Lawdog

The butter-yellow glow from the lamps was barely strong enough to cast a reflection of Garry's features upon the dusty window pane. It showed an expressionless face with gray eyes, high cheekbones and lips that made a hard, white wedge against the darker hue of his skin, the face of a man of taciturn disposition.

Ed Garry was six feet tall, and his hundred and eighty-five pounds were distributed over a muscular frame—heavy in the shoulders and upper arms, narrow and trim at the waist and thighs.

His left arm idly brushed against the pocket of his checkered shirt. He felt the thin, sharp outlines of his Deputy U. S. Marshal badge beneath the coarse fabric. His lips pressed together more tightly and his eyes darkened.

The wail of the locomotive whistle drilled through the night. There was a squealing of brakes as the engineer cut his throttle and the train began to lose headway. The door at the forward end of the coach opened and the conductor stuck his head inside.

"Rincon!" he bellowed.

Jolting over switch frogs, the train clattered past a little depot and halted opposite a baggage shed. Several men got off and strolled across the cinders to the station. Then the train rumbled into motion again.

Garry heard the mounting rhythm of the piston strokes, the gradual merging of rail clicks into a solid rattle. Abruptly he straightened in his seat and peered through the window as boots pounded along the cinders which lined the right-of-way. Someone was trying to get aboard the train. Out of the night's impenetrable gloom came a high-pitched yell. Something slammed into the side of the car with a crunching impact.

THE yell from outside was not repeated. There was no other sound except the noise of the locomotive's exhaust. Then the door swung open and Garry's curious glance lifted to the man who stood on the platform.

A swirl of smoke drifted past him. But it failed to hide the frozen tightness of the man's thin face or the hunted look in his eyes. His breathing was shallow and rapid from recent exertion.

He studied the occupants of the coach with an intent care. Then, staring over his shoulder toward the platform behind him, he shambled down the aisle.

There was sickness and pain in his narrow, bony face. His black coat hung loosely on his stringy body and he carried his left arm stiffly against his side as he made his slow journey down the car aisle.

Finally, he paused beside Garry's seat. Something came and went in the man's red-veined eyes as they lingered on Ed Garry's sun-bronzed face. Then he appeared to come to a decision, and slid awkwardly down beside the deputy marshal.

"Trouble?" Garry inquired.

"I'm all right—just winded from runnin'," came the muffled reply.

Garry shrugged and turned away. The conductor shouldered through the door at the rear of the car and approached.

"Where to?" he demanded.

"Tumult."

Garry remained facing the window, but interest deepened in his eyes as he watched the other man fumble in his pockets for money to pay the fare. Every move seemed to require a tremendous effort. By the time the conductor had moved on through the coach the man's face was greased with a shiny film of sweat.

The train rumbled on through the prairie night, the *click-clack* of the wheels merging with the creaking of the sun-dried panels inside the coach. Then as locomotive and cars bucked a steeply banked curve, Garry saw the man beside him sway forward and pitch out of the seat.

He landed on hands and knees in the aisle. Quickly Garry rose. He thrust his hands under the man's armpits and hauled him back onto the seat.

Slowly the fellow straightened. He clamped his arms to his sides, as Garry removed his supporting hands. Garry stared curiously at the damp red stain in his right palm.

The stranger saw the stain, too. He said nothing. He sat there stiffly waiting, and watching Garry's sharp glance travel to the soggy area far down along the side of his shirt and half hidden by his arm.

"Friend," said Garry, "I reckon yuh could use a sawbones. Yuh packin' some lead in yuh?"

"Yeah." The reply was curt. It held Garry off, invited no further comment.

"It was at Rincon, wasn't it?" Garry persisted. "I heard a shot—when yuh were runnin' to catch the train."

"They tried—to kill me." The wounded man's words were husky and strained.

"Who was it?" Garry asked bluntly.

"Didn't see." There was a pause during which the man's labored breathing sawed up and down in a ragged, rasping rhythm. "Shot from behind—don't know why—"

The man broke off as if he had been startled by some sound. He turned half-around to peer nervously toward the rear of the coach. There was no movement in the dim shadows near the back door. Yet, dread kept riding the man.

"They followed yuh on the train?" Garry asked gently.

The other man's eyes were like pale gray marbles.

"I reckon not. But—"

"Better let me take a look at that bullet-hole in yore side," Garry suggested. "It's givin' yuh plenty of punishment."

He slid along the seat toward the stranger. The man waved him back, gritting his teeth as a sudden jolt of pain hit him.

"No time now—be in Tumult soon—got to get off . . ." The words dwindled weakly away into the clatter of the train as it sped

The killer's gun descended in a vicious arc (CHAP. XXI)

over the rails. Then the tortured gray eyes found Garry's sun-darkened features again. "Masters is my name," he ventured finally. "You goin' to Tumult, by any chance?"

A faint wariness beat inside Garry. He studied Masters carefully. He could readily see that the man was holding on to consciousness by sheer will power alone. Far-fetched as it seemed, he found himself speculating whether the attempted killing of Masters was even remotely connected with the trouble that was bringing him, Ed Garry, to Tumult. It wasn't likely—and yet, he felt now a familiar telltale pressure in his shoulders that was sure sign of trouble to come.

HE GAVE his name to Masters and added briefly, "My ticket reads Tumult." When Masters made no reply he said, "Meetin' somebody there?"

"Yeah." Masters' voice shook. "But don't know if I can even get off the train by myself."

"I'll give yuh a hand," Garry offered.

He twisted around in his seat as the conductor threw open the door of the coach and yelled:

"Tumult!"

The train had not yet begun to slow down. Yet, that one shouted word propelled Masters out of his seat. Garry plunged after him, caught him by the elbow and guided him along the aisle.

They came out on the platform and gripped the metal hand-rail as the brakes took hold. Masters lurched toward the steps, but Garry pushed past him and descended to the bottom step. Gaging the slackening progress of the train, he jumped. He landed on both feet, plunging forward at a shambling run.

Masters still clung to the rail. Then, as Garry came abreast of the steps, Masters jumped. His feet hit the cinders and he fell against Garry, dragging him down.

Locked in each other's arms, they rolled down an embankment and smashed into the bole of a tree. The force of the crash jolted the breath out of Garry.

Finally, he freed his arms, pushed Masters away and got up. Masters stirred, opened his eyes. He lay there, spent and weary, for a second or two before he rolled over on his hands and knees and started to struggle upward.

Garry hauled him up, and slowly they climbed the embankment. The scarlet flicker of the train's rear lamps slid away through the darkness.

"Any special place in town?" Garry queried as they clambered across the rails and cut across the flats toward town.

"The Wagon Wheel—that's the hotel," Masters answered in a hoarse whisper. "Got to meet—"

He broke off, slanted a sharp glance toward Garry. When Garry didn't press him, he seemed relieved. But Garry could tell that his stamina was draining out of him fast. Masters stumbled more frequently now. He kept lurching against Garry, and his movements were leaden.

At the edge of the broad ribbon of gray dust that formed Tumult's main street a horseman cut in ahead of them from the wagon road west of town. The rider drew his horse down to a canter, twisted in his saddle to watch Garry and Masters, then quickly dug in his spurs and rode away. And there was something disturbing in the way the man sped off, flinging over his shoulder another curious glance.

Suddenly Garry didn't like what he was walking into. He had a definite mission in this town, and the certainty grew within him that each moment he remained with Masters was taking him farther and farther into a network of intrigue which did not concern him, and which might conceivably handicap him in the grim game he had come to play in Tumult.

They passed the lighted archway of a livery stable, then the stacked piles of newly sawed timber in a lumber yard. Beyond the next intersection Garry could see several saloons. Shafts of bright yellow light spilled across the street as punchers and townsmen shouldered through the batwing doors.

Garry felt Masters lean against him and automatically tightened his arm around the man. The deputy marshal could feel the stickiness of blood on his hand again.

"I reckon yore first step better be the sawbones," he told Masters.

Masters shook his head weakly.

"No—just a drink."

Garry hesitated a moment, then guided Masters along the walk to the nearest saloon.

Inside, the odor of sawdust, stale whisky and sweat hit them. Garry slanted away from the battered pine bar which took up most of the right-hand wall and proceeded to a table at the far end of the room.

Masters sagged into a chair, one shoulder

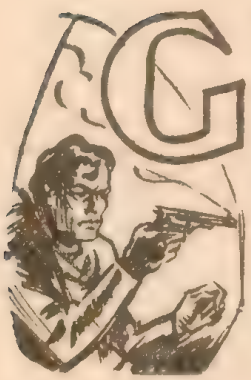
propped against a wall, and his tired, bloodshot eyes surveyed the place. As Garry left him and went to the bar, two cowpunchers in faded levis who were drinking beer at the end of the bar gave him sharp, half-hostile glances, then briefly slid their attention to Masters.

But brief as those glances had been, Garry had caught the antagonism, the veiled suspicion in their eyes, and was not surprised. For he knew that Tumult was a town under stress and strain. Trouble here, and threats of trouble were turning men wary, suspicious of eath other, and altogether chary of strangers. And Garry was a stranger.

Garry ordered a bottle of whisky and two glasses, and returned to the table. Masters was leaning across the scarred top, elbows supporting the weight of his upper body. His face had a gray, unhealthy pallor and his eyes were dull. He was near the end of his string.

CHAPTER II

Saloon Bushwhack



GARRY uncorked the whisky bottle and poured a large draught in Masters' glass. He slid the glass toward Masters, then filled his own. Masters' fingers shook, but he got the whisky to his lips and drained the glass.

He coughed a little after it was down. But his eyes seemed to brighten and a little color came back into his cheeks.

"I—needed that," he said.

He stared past Garry toward the bar. Garry, turning casually, saw the two cowpunchers watching their table.

"Know them?" Garry asked.

"No." Masters paused. He looked gray and sick again. "But they may know me." Then in a low, urgent voice he said, "Hitch your chair closer."

Garry did so, and groped for the bottle as Masters' hand slid across the table to trap his own. Their palms crossed briefly. But the interval sufficed for Masters to slip a folded square of paper into Garry's hand.

"Put that away, in a safe place," Masters

Directly beneath the window Garry saw the leather heel (CHAP. II)

mumbled weakly. "It's—very—important." Cold beads of moisture glistened on his forehead. "Maybe I won't—make it. Give that note to—"

He broke off as a sharp, metallic click reached their ears. Garry hitched his chair around and shot a glance toward the open alley window.

He saw somebody outside poke a rifle barrel through the aperture. He saw the white, indistinct blur of a face behind the gun, saw the barrel sweep down in line with Masters' chest—and acted instinctively.

Rolling off the chair, he threw himself against Masters, just as the rifle at the window roared. Even as the chair tipped over, and Garry reached for Masters to push him behind the table, a convulsion shook Masters' wiry frame. Garry knew, then, that the rifle slug had found its mark.

The chair beneath Masters had collapsed, spilling Masters and Garry in a tangled heap beneath the table. For an interval that seemed an eternity to Garry his right arm was imprisoned by Masters' body. At last, he jerked it clear and grabbed his six-gun.

It was canting upward in his fist when the rifleman's second shot shattered one of the coal-oil lamps hanging over the bar. The two punchers and the bartender dived for cover.

Garry pumped a shot toward the window, heard the pane blow out in a splintering spray of glass. Then the ambusher fired again. There was another crash as the remaining lamp blinked out.

Darkness dropped like a smothering blanket upon the room. The smell of whisky, gunsmoke and spilled coal-oil spiked the close, hot air. On hands and knees Garry crawled away from the table. He put two more bullets through the window, but drew no answering fire.

Someone, however, was moving in the room. He heard the faint scuff of boots along the floor, then saw a black bulk move across the grayer blot that was the alley window and lifted his gun upon it. But at the instant of firing something struck his arm. The shot angled high. In the brief splash of muzzle flame he saw a man rise out of the darkness directly in front of him.

Garry chopped down savagely with his gun, caught his unknown adversary on the bony ridge of a shoulder. The other man grunted in pain and fell against Garry's knees. They went over backward, with Garry underneath.

The Colt slipped from Garry's fingers. He struck out blindly with his fists, but hit nothing. Then a gun barrel slammed against his own head. He went down on his face, hearing the ambusher fumble around in the darkness near the spot where Masters had fallen. As consciousness ebbed away, his last thought was that the ambusher was searching his victim. He made a desperate attempt to rise—then an overwhelming blackness washed over his mind. . . .

Garry could not have been out for more than a minute or two, for he opened his eyes as the darkness was broken by a sudden flare of light across the room. Scrambling to his feet he saw the bartender crouched on top of the bar, hooking an ordinary stable lantern to the chains that had held the coal-oil lamp.

There was a commotion at the door. Men began to stream into the saloon. Garry gingerly felt a rising lump on his head right above his ear. Every time he twisted his neck dizziness hit him.

Moving around the upended table, he hunkered down beside Masters. One glance was enough to tell him that Masters was dead. Fresh blood had made a wide stain across the front of his plaid shirt.

A FIERCE light burned in Ed Garry's eyes when he rose. He started toward the window that opened on the alley, then noticed his six-gun lying on the floor and picked it up. Wheeling toward the window again, he found the way blocked by a big, heavy-featured man with a great mop of yellow hair that gave him a leonine appearance.

"Goin' some place, stranger?" the big man inquired.

"Mebbe," Garry said evenly. "Any business of yores?"

"Mebbe," repeated the other man. "There's a dead man on the floor behind yuh. That calls for a little talkin'. Joel Benton's the name, if yuh want to know who's sayin' so."

Night's wind had whipped a ruddy color into the yellow-haired man's cheeks. He was a cool man, and thoroughly sure of himself at this moment. He was wearing a gunbelt, but his hands were empty. Garry noted that he had big hands and wide wrists. Tufts of yellow hair grew thickly behind the knuckles of his blunt fingers, and the palms of his hands, when he turned them outward,

showed the rope burns and calluses of a working cattleman.

"Yuh'll get yore talk—later," Garry said sharply, the fire in his eyes challenging.

When the other man showed no inclination to move out of his way, Garry laid the palm of his left hand against his chest and pushed. The man fell backward a step or two, his face flushing darkly.

Garry moved on until a taut voice hauled him around.

"Hold it, pilgrim, or I'll put a bullet through yore back!"

The speaker was a portly, slack-jawed man with heavy jowls and furtive gray eyes. There was a law badge pinned on his cowhide vest and a cedar-butted Colt jutted from his fist. Behind him other men crowded in from the street, muttering and talking excitedly.

Gesturing toward Masters' sprawled body, the lawman flung a question at the yellow-haired rancher.

"Ever see him before, Benton?"

Joel Benton shook his head. Slowly his bright blue eyes came around to Garry and stayed there. He was remembering the shove Garry had given him, and fighting impulses inside his big, rawhide frame were urging action.

"This stranger seemed mighty interested in him when I walked in, Toler," Benton said at last. "Yuh goin' to hear what he has to say?"

The lawman called Toler nodded, and a wolfish grin knifed across his face as he moved forward.

"They come in together a few minutes ago," the bartender called across the room. "Bought a bottle of red-eye. They seemed to be friends."

"All right, Moose," Toler cut in abruptly. He glanced at Masters' body. "Looks as if somebody's gone through his pockets. Two of 'em turned inside out." He whirled on Garry. "Now tell me what yuh know about this."

Garry had moved to the shattered window. His boots made a crunching sound as they tramped upon shards of broken glass.

"Any talkin' I do," he said in a dangerously soft tone, "will have to be later. Somebody just ambushed that feller on the floor and made a try for me. I aim to pick up the killer's trail."

Garry's solid figure was limned against the window now. The strength that was in him was in the very tones of his voice, communicating itself to Toler and Benton. Without waiting for a protest he hooked one leg over the window-sill and vaulted into the alley.

Under cover of the darkness he hid the note Masters had given him in the inside band of his hat. He heard excited shouts as the men inside the saloon pounded to the window. Ignoring them, he struck a match, held its flickering flame between his cupped palms and studied the ground.

Close against the building and directly beneath the window he saw a leather heel. It was from a cowman's boot. The leather was worn down on the right-hand side and one nail-head was missing from the pattern of nails that had fastened it to the last.

He shoved the heel in a trousers pocket as Benton and Toler started to climb through the window. Toler gave him a challenging look, but he ignored the lawman and went on searching along the alley. Striking another match, he saw several smudged imprints of a man's boot. Then he gave a low exclamation.

"What is it?" Toler asked sharply and suspiciously. "What yuh found?"

Garry indicated an oblong crease in the soft brown dust.

"A rifle butt made that," he said. "Has a nick out of one end, too. See how the outline of it tapers off sudden?"

Joel Benton snorted and gave Garry a cynical glance.

"It might be a rifle butt," he said. "And it might be anything. And how do yuh know the mark was made tonight?"

GARRY made no reply. He swung away from the saloon, moved down the alley, now and then striking a match. He followed the line of boot prints all the way to a grove of trees beyond the intersecting alley. There he found the imprints of a horse and knew, then, that the ambusher had made good his escape. Slowly he retraced his steps, Benton and Toler following him.

A crowd still milled inside the saloon and Toler had to chase some of them out into the street. Masters' body had been carried to a table against the back wall, and a short, stubby, black-coated man was bending over him.

A tall, pretty girl turned away from the table as Garry came up to it. She had clear gray-green eyes, but in them now was un-

mistakable grief. Toler moved past Garry and spoke to the girl.

"Janet Masters! Yuh knew this dead man?"

She lifted her somber, quiet glance to him and nodded.

"He was my uncle, Harley Masters." Her voice was low and even, yet it somehow betrayed a strong pulse of anger throbbing inside her. "I was expecting him on the night train. But he wasn't on it when it pulled into the station. My cousin, Bill, and I were told he was here—what had happened."

A dark young man who bore a faint family resemblance to the girl stepped around the table to confront Toler.

"Nothin' we can do for Harley now—except find his killer," he murmured thinly. "How about it, Weed?"

The marks of pride and arrogance were on the sun-bronzed, young face. The sullen, thin-lipped mouth was straight and sharp across the weathered skin as though cut by the flick of a knife blade.

Weed Toler rubbed his left hand up and down the short beard stubble on his cheeks. "My sympathies, Bill," he said uneasily with a trace of awkwardness. "Only one gent here can tell us anythin' at all. . ."

"Who's that?" Bill Masters snapped.

Toler had started to turn to Garry, when the bald-headed bartender spoke.

"There he is, Bill," he said, indicating Garry. "He came in here with the old gent—I mean Miss Janet's uncle. They was settin' at one of the tables only a few minutes when I heard a clickin' sound. I was wipin' glasses and rackin' 'em up along the back-bar. I turned around and saw this jigger throw hisself on the old feller just as a gun went off and the lights went out."

"Where did the shot come from?" Garry demanded with a harsh vehemence. "Tell 'em that!"

"I—I can't rightly tell," the bartender said slowly. "It all happened so fast. The next minute all perdition broke loose in here."

The bartender's dull, vacant smile seemed to ask for recognition from the girl. But she didn't even look at him.

Bill Masters growled an oath and pushed the bartender aside.

"Hombre," he said to Garry, "if you killed Harley yuh'll never walk out of here alive! Let me see yore gun."

Garry glanced at him sharply. "You or Toler the law in Tumult?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Plenty—to me."

Masters' mouth hardened. His hand slid swiftly to the holster resting against his thigh.

"Cuss yuh—I'll take yore gun!"

There was deft, sure speed in Masters' gesture. Yet he had his weapon only half out of holster when Garry's big Colt whipped up into his hand. He held the gun for a brief instant with the barrel menacing Masters, then quickly reversed it and passed it butt-first to Toler.

"Yuh'll find it's been fired," Garry told the lawman. "I had a go at the bushwhacker, but missed. The first shot came from the window. I tried to knock the old feller to the floor. But I wasn't in time."

"If yuh believe that, Toler, yuh're a blasted fool!" Masters said, thin lips twitching with rage. "He's a two-bit gunslick!"

"If I was, Masters," Garry said evenly, "you'd be dead this minute."

CHAPTER III

Janet's Challenge

NOT a man in the room but knew the truth of what Ed Garry said. The average gunman, the man who lived by his wits and the speed of his draw, who hired out his guns for pay, would have dropped Masters at his first move toward his .45. Bill Masters had forced the play, and he was alive only because Garry had chosen to spare him.

The knowledge of this was clear to the crowd. And it was clear to Bill Masters. But his pride had been struck a severe blow. He couldn't tolerate the flicker of amusement, the slow blooming of scorn in the eyes of the men who were watching so closely.

"Mebbe yuh'd like to carry this a little further," he invited hotly.

Garry remained cool and controlled. There was an intangible aura of sturdiness, of calm self-reliance about him that impressed every man present. Even Masters was conscious of it and felt sudden sickening doubt about the wisdom of his own defiant words.

But Garry wasn't even looking at him. He was thinking, with annoyance, that he had got away to a bad start in Tumult. The killing of Harley Masters had dragged him into the middle of things. He had become the focal point of the town's attention—just what he had wished to avoid.

After a moment his attention swung back to Bill Masters.

"Masters," he said bluntly, a hard light in his eyes, "don't ever crowd me. It ain't healthy."

Bill Masters did not move. Nor did he speak. Then Janet stepped in front of her cousin.

"Never mind," she said wearily. "Let it go." But as she turned away, without waiting for his reply, she gave Garry a withering glance. "Now that you've shown us how tough you are," she added with disconcerting directness, "perhaps you'll tell us some of the things we wish to know, Mr.—"

"Ed Garry's the name," he said, and swept off his hat. "Ma'am, I'm mighty sorry about yore uncle." He nodded toward the table behind her. A lock of coal-black hair had fallen across his forehead, and he pushed at it to hide his embarassment.

"I wonder if you are," she said quietly.

She had held herself rigidly under control, but as she saw the faint smile on his face—it was a smile of admiration for her loveliness which anger and hauteur seemed to render more vivid and poignant—she misinterpreted it. Swiftly she brought up the quirt she was holding in her hand, a furious challenge in her eyes, her shoulders very straight.

"You seem to find this amusing," she snapped. "Well, I'll tell you something." Her temper was unrestrained now, and it was plain that she did not intend to be crossed by this stranger. "You make big tracks when you walk. Your shadow looks big, too, when you see it on the wall. And you've got everybody in this room buffaloed. Everybody except me. My uncle died here tonight. I want his killer—and I want him fast! Maybe it's you. And maybe not. But you talk—and fast before I start writing my name with this quirt on your face!"

Perhaps, it was the determined, unyielding way she tried to face Garry down. Perhaps something in the girl herself. But whatever it was, for a moment Garry was shaken as he had never been shaken before.

"Ma'am," he said, staring down at her, his smile gone now. "Yuh're right, Death is never amusin'. That wasn't why I was smilin'. As for yore uncle, I saw him for the first time tonight when he boarded the train at Rincon."

Briefly he gave an account of what had happened from the time Harley Masters had entered the railroad car until the fatal shooting.

"He was wounded when he got on the train?" Janet demanded.

"Yes. As I told yuh, I heard a man runnin' beside the train, then a shot. It was after that he got on. Somebody was after him then—and it looks like whoever that was knew where he was goin' and follered him here."

"If he was wounded, why didn't you try to get him to a doctor?" Janet asked curtly.

"He wouldn't listen to the idea," Garry told her. "He was in bad shape. But he kept sayin' he had to meet somebody in Tumult. I reckon he meant you."

"It could have been someone else, I suppose," Janet said, after an uncomfortable moment of silence. "But who and why?" She paused, studying Garry keenly. "You said the shots came from the window facing the alley, and that the killer had a rifle. Did you see his face?"

"No. I only wish I had. All I could see was a white blur, before things began to happen." Garry looked beyond the girl and caught the doctor's eye. "How about it, Doc? Yuh get the bullets yet?"

Doc Vinson's stubby body, portly and slack-muscled, shook as he waddled forward.

"I'll probe for them later," he said. "But you're right about them being rifle slugs. Both of them."

JANET was restless. Garry felt her watching him, measuring him. He got the sudden impression that she wanted to question him further, yet some inner caution restrained her. At last, her lips settled firmly and he knew she had reached a decision.

"Did my uncle say anything, or give anything to you for me?" she asked.

A stir of interest showed in the faces of the men in the crowd. Joel Benton shuffled his feet, and something odd slid across his eyes like a muddy film.

Garry hesitated a brief instant. Was this the time to tell about the paper Harley Masters had given to him just before his death? Then he said:

"Why, no. Was he supposed to be bringin' yuh some important information?"

Janet had not missed Garry's delay in answering. An unfathomable expression flickered in her eyes, then vanished.

"I don't know," she said vaguely. She tried to make her voice sound convincing, but to Garry it was not. "I had a letter from him and I thought—"

She broke off as the drum-roll of hoofs from the street outside beat like summer thunder through the saloon. Three riders reined to a halt in the dust beyond the hitch-rack. They dropped from their saddles, brushed noisily into the saloon.

"Heard there was a ruckus in here," the foremost man, obviously a rancher, judging by his rough range garb, said gruffly. "What was it all about?"

He was a stocky, short-legged man and he pushed through the throng without much regard for those who stood in his path. Garry heard a raspy whisper: "Leo Hanald!"

"Don't yuh know, Hanald?" Bill Masters asked.

"How in thunder could I?" Hanald retorted. "I just pulled into town."

There was no friendliness in the way Hanald and his two riders regarded Masters. They stood taut and still, plainly braced for trouble, should it come.

"That so?" Masters smiled thinly. "I wonder if yuh could prove that—" He stopped, letting the heavy doubt in his words speak for itself. Then before Hanald could lash him with an angry retort, Masters added: "There was a killing here. Janet's uncle, Harley Masters. He was bushwhacked from the alley window. That makes two, doesn't it?"

Hanald was staring past Masters, at the dead man sprawled on the table. But suddenly Bill Masters' insidious remarks registered. Hanald swung around, his fists bunching into knotted spheres of bone and muscle.

"Yuh've got somethin' in yore craw, Masters," he said tightly. "Better get it out pronto."

"Why, I imagine Bill is just thinking the same thing a lot of other folks in this room are thinking," Janet cut in swiftly. Her eyes were bright, accusing in a face gone white.

"Which is?" Hanald queried tersely. He hooked his thumbs in his cartridge belt and grimly waited.

She gave it to him, then, slowly and carefully.

"I reckon Bill is thinking that this makes two killings for the Big E. First it was Old Salty, my father—three months ago. Tonight it was Harley, my uncle. And both were shot from ambush."

She paused significantly, then added with a twisted, humorless smile:

"Interesting, wouldn't you say?" And behind her mocking smile flickered a white-hot flame of rage. "Especially interesting because you and your Broken Spur outfit have the best possible motive for seeing the Big E backed against the wall. Because you've never forgotten or forgiven the fact that we drove you off our East Fork land several months ago. And because you'd do anything to break our power in the valley!"

DANGER signals were in Hanald's black eyes which now resembled a couple of round, hard marbles in the flat gray of his face. He was fighting himself, his hands helplessly clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"Because yuh're a woman," he said with brutal frankness, "and because the Big E has always thought itself too high and mighty for most of the cattle outfits in Tumult, yuh've done about as yuh pleased. But I'm warnin' yuh, it's goin' to stop—tonight. I'd never take that kind of talk from a man. I won't take it from you any longer. Yuh've dropped yore hints that mebbe I drygulched yore father and yore uncle. I tell yuh I didn't. If I have to kill a man I'll do it with the whole town lookin' on—and not in the back or from an alley window."

Janet faced Hanald, meeting his burning gaze without flinching.

"Better take a look at his saddle carbine, Weed," she said sharply to Toler.

"So it was a rifle," Hanald said quickly. "Help yoreself, Toler."

Toler tramped outside and returned at once with a Winchester. He broke it, examined the loads and sniffed at the barrel.

"Not fired recent," he observed, and shot a half-apologetic glance at Janet.

"Satisfied?" Hanald said savagely.

"Maybe," she said. "But there's still East Forks. The Big E lost a man there. Remember?"

"Shore. So did Broken Spur. And I'm also rememberin' that East Forks is open range."

"Open range that we've been using for extra graze," she said shortly.

Grasping Janet in his arms, Garry hauled her free of the stirrups (CHAP. XV)

Hanald ran strong, thick fingers through his thinning gray hair. His face now had a frozen tightness about it.

"Mebbe it won't be open range long," he said.

Bill Masters, annoyed at having been thrust out of this verbal battle, sounded a warning.

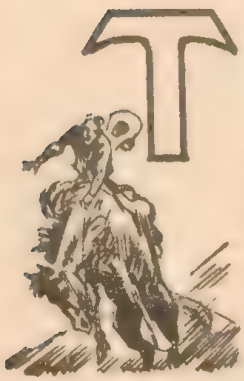
"If yuh're figgerin' on movin' back," he said harshly, "bring plenty of men and guns. Yuh'll need 'em both."

Hanald's lips twisted. "Don't be too shore I'll need 'em," he defied.

He swung on his heels and gestured to his two riders. They followed him outside, all the crowd in the saloon silently watching.

CHAPTER IV

Map of Death



THE oppressive stillness following Hanald's departure, was finally broken by Janet.

"Kyle Freeling!" she called to a homely, saturnine puncher lounging idly near the saloon doorway. "Come here and give Bill a hand in carrying Uncle Harley over to Watkins' Funeral Parlor."

The puncher wheeled slowly around. His dark eyes, half-hidden under bushy black brows, looked across the room at Ed Garry, then slid furtively away. But already Garry had recognized one of the men in range garb who had been drinking at the bar when he had first entered the saloon.

Garry started toward Freeling, but Toler stepped in his way. Seeing the portly lawman reminded Garry that he didn't have his gun.

"What's yore rush?" blustered Toler.

"Yuh're through here, ain't yuh?" Garry said placidly. "I'll take my gun."

Toler's hand dropped instinctively to Garry's Colt which he had thrust in his waistband.

"I ought to hold yuh in connection with Harley Masters' death."

"On what evidence?" Garry snapped.

"Well—" Toler began uncertainly, "I'll have to hold yore gun till I'm shore how yuh figger in this—and what yore business is."

"Don't worry about my business, Toler," Garry snapped. "And if yuh want me for further questionin' I'll be around." He held out his hand. "My gun."

Somehow Toler couldn't face the compelling insistence in Garry's quiet manner, the danger lurking in his gray eyes.

Reluctantly he passed the Colt to Garry. Garry took it without a word. He broke it open, spun the cylinder, then punched two fresh shells past the loading gate and slid the weapon back into the holster hanging low on his right hip.

Turning his back to the room he strode out into the cool darkness of the street, and headed for the Wagon Wheel Hotel.

The lobby of the Wagon Wheel was deserted, except for a lanky bespectacled clerk seated behind the plain board counter, when Garry entered. Through an open archway he saw a few people finishing supper. That reminded him acutely of his own hunger. But before he ate he wanted a room and a drink.

At the desk he registered, and the clerk turned to a row of numbered hooks on the wall behind the counter. He lifted off a key and flung it down.

"Take Number Seventeen," he said. "That'll be two dollars. Yuh pay right now."

Garry brought out two dollars, took the key, tramped across the lobby to the rickety stairs. A wagon wheel was nailed to the wall above the stairway.

He found Number 17 at the end of a gloomy corridor. A blast of stale heat struck him when he flung open the door. He threw his sombrero on the bed and raised the single window. A slight breeze stirred the dusty yellow curtains.

Garry pulled his sweat-soaked shirt over his head and hung it over the foot of the bed to dry out until he could get a fresh one. Then at the battered wash-stand he poured water from the china pitcher into the bowl and washed. Freshened, he sank down on the bed and pried up the inside band of his hat, removing the folded square of paper Harley Masters had given him.

He felt a little start of surprise when he saw that it was a crude, penciled map. The names of Rincon, Tumult, and another town, Buchard, across the mountains, were printed plainly in their appropriate areas. The boundaries of the Big E, Broken Spur, B in a Box, Hatchet and other cattle outfits were traced in, too. Two lines which began at

Rincon wandered over the map, crossing the valley at widely divergent points but coming together across the divide at Buchard.

Not familiar with the country, Garry was unable to read any significance into the map. Yet obviously enough it had figured in Harley Masters' untimely end. And Masters had made a great show of secrecy in passing it to him.

Was this map the object of Janet Masters' questioning? And was it also the object of the ambusher's frantic search of Harley Masters' body during those seconds in which he, Garry, had been fighting against oblivion after that blow on the head? Garry thought it was.

He recalled his resentment at the unexpected circumstances which had thrown him into contact with Harley Masters because it threatened to interfere with the job he had to do in Tumult. Now that Masters was dead, the conviction began to grow that the killing was tied in with the trouble that had brought him more than a hundred miles across the hot, dusty prairie country.

THE deaths of Harley Masters and of "Salty" Masters several months ago were obviously connected in some vicious and calculated pattern of deviltry. Of one thing Garry was certain. The pattern was not yet complete. There was more violence and death to come.

Tumult was a town on edge, doubtful of the loyalties of its scattered outfits. It had already been made clear to Garry that the Broken Spur and Big E spreads were at each other's throats. And what of the other ranchers? Men like Joel Benton, and other men he had not met. Where did they stand? What did they know about Harley Masters' killing?

Garry thought of old Syl Darwin, senior marshal at Hobart, and his direct superior. Darwin had been blunt in his brief survey of the situation before sending Garry out.

"Ed," he had said in his deep voice, looking sharply at Garry, "this isn't the kind of job I'd send just any man out on. Yuh'll be buckin' tough odds. I know yuh're used to that. But this is somethin' special. Rustlers are makin' things tough for the cattle outfits in Tumult, on the other side of the divide, and there's been trouble between the outfits, too. Over free range. There was a killin' months ago. Rancher by the name of Salty Masters. He was bushwhacked."

"We're movin' in kind of late," Garry had observed.

Darwin had agreed, but added: "The report only came in—through a friend of mine. He's asked for help because he thinks there's more and worse trouble to come."

"Yuh want me to clean up that town?" Garry had asked.

"Yeah."

Darwin had paused after that, his brooding glance settling on Garry.

"Go on," Garry had muttered impatiently. "Yuh're not finished. There's somethin' else."

"There is," Darwin had admitted, "and it won't make yore job any easier. I've got reason to believe a bunch of outlaws have holed up in the hills above Tumult."

"So?" Garry had prodded.

"A couple of 'em are wanted on Federal charges. I want those men. Dead or alive. And while yuh're there have a look at the rustlin' and pick up the trail of that killin'."

Garry had realized, then, how tough the assignment was to be. Yet, his years as a deputy marshal had hardened him. There wasn't much that could break through his cold indifference to personal risk or danger.

"Got the names of the renegades?" he had asked.

"Shore, Ed. Colt Redwood and Jed Northey."

"And the charges?"

"Mail robbery and murder."

Garry had clamped his black sombrero on his head, said "So long, Syl" and started for the door. Darwin had called him back.

"One thing more. If yuh get into a tight look up a man named Jeff Lance. He's the one asked for help. Sheriff in Tumult. And yuh can trust him."

Now here Ed Garry was in Tumult. And the game was moving along. Another killing—and other moves to come.

He rose from the bed, slipped on his shirt, blew out the lamp on the bureau, and stalked out of the room.

Down in the street Tumult's night life was in full swing. A loaded freight wagon rumbled through the ruts. Somewhere down a side street a wood saw sent its rasping song into the darkness. A couple of riders galloped up to a saloon, dismounted, looping their reins around the hitch-rack, then vanished inside.

Garry turned in at the saloon the riders had just entered. He paused near the bat-

wings, listening to the dull drone of talk, the clink of glasses on the bar, the slap of a card on a table.

Men turned to watch him, and slowly their talk died and the other familiar noises faded away, leaving a taut silence that was like a cold hand pushing against his shoulder blades.

He walked away from the batwing doors. Still silence. The only sound was the measured thump of his boots striking the sawdust-strewn puncheons. He let his glance, challenging and half-mocking, drive against the men lined up at the bar. And suddenly they discovered they couldn't meet the frigid intentness of his eyes. One by one they went back to their drinking.

GARRY found a place at the bar, and the bartender approached, wiping the stained pine surface with a damp cloth.

"Beer," said Garry.

The bartender filled a glass and slid it toward Garry who tossed a bill on the bar. The bartender moved to a wooden box under the bar to make change, laid the coins in front of Garry, and started to turn away.

"Wait," said Garry. The bartender paused. Garry went on, deliberately raising the pitch of his voice: "I'm lookin' for two men. Colt Redwood and Jed Northey. Know anybody by that name?"

Again silence settled over the saloon like a thick blanket of fog. The stale, smoke-filled air seemed to quiver with some invisible menace.

Men were watching Garry again, alert and uneasy and hostile. He saw the bartender's glance shift quickly along the bar and stop at Joel Benton.

Benton's leonine head was up, his thick yellow hair showing raggedly out from under his hat-brim. The whisky glass in his big, blunt-fingered hand shook slightly. He looked from the bartender to Garry without any change of expression. Then slowly and deliberately he lowered his attention to his drink.

Some signal had passed between Benton and the bartender. Garry was sure of it though there had been no visible sign. And all the while a deadly undertow of antagonism swirled against him.

The bartender turned, his face sharper than it had been.

"Friends of yores?" he inquired.

Garry ignored the question. He asked bluntly: "Ever hear of 'em?"

An enigmatic smile lifted the corners of the bartender's mouth.

"All kinds of men come in here—" He broke off, asked a swift question. "What yuh want with 'em?"

Garry's answer came sharp and fast.

"Just tell 'em Ed Garry wants to see 'em. They can look me up in town here. I'll be around."

In the uneasy silence he drank the rest of his beer, crossed the barroom and pushed through the batwing doors.

The darkness outside was cool and refreshing. Garry paused and let a gusty, pent-up breath spill from his lungs. He had cut things rather fine back in the saloon.

Tumult had him marked now. There was no friendliness for him here. He stood alone —as he had always stood—and he didn't care. For he had dealt a new hand in the grim game that was being played in this town. Soon someone would open the pot and draw cards.

CHAPTER V

"I've Seen Yuh Before"

ONE thing Ed Garry was certain. The names of Redwood and Northey had struck a chord of meaning in the saloon. Behind the bartender's awkward questioning, behind Joel Benton's studied indifference lurked a burning interest.

Garry reached for the sack of "Bull Durham" in his pocket, feeling the need of a smoke. He took his time building the quirly and remained with his back and shoulders against the saloon wall until he had smoked the cigarette through. Then, feeling the sudden pangs of hunger, he walked back to the hotel.

The lobby was deserted when he entered. The dining room was dark since it was well past the supper hour. The clerk looked up as Garry approached the desk.

"Where's a good place to get some supper?" Garry inquired.

"No better place than right here in the hotel," said a melodious voice behind him.

Garry swung around and saw a slender, dark-haired girl. She had silently emerged from the darkened dining room. She wore a green dress with white lace at the throat, and her hair was drawn straight back, parted in the center, and rolled in a bun at the nape of her neck.

"The dining room has been closed for more than an hour," the clerk growled. "Don't tell me yuh've forgot that, Claire."

"I know," she replied, unruffled. "But there's a steak and some potatoes left in the kitchen and a slab of apple pie." She lifted her long-lashed, olive-brown eyes and smiled at Garry. "Interested, stranger?"

His answering grin erased some of the implacable hardness from his face, leaving it almost handsome.

"Shore," he murmured. "Just lead the way."

She hurried into the dining room and lit one of the ceiling lamps.

Garry tossed his hat onto an empty chair and steadily regarded her in the lamplight. There was an abundant vitality in her, a fierce will to savor life and excitement. He noted the gentle curve of her tanned cheeks, the generous cut of her mouth, the lithe figure. But always his glance returned to her olive-brown eyes. They were beautiful eyes, with an odd depth in them—and they held a bantering lightness that was disturbing.

She met his gaze with a frankness that startled him.

"I didn't get your name," she said bluntly.

"Ed Garry," he said.

"Mine's Claire Benton," she said with a smile.

Garry's surprise at hearing her name was only equaled by his surprise to see her extend a hand toward him. He took it automatically. For just a moment he felt the tingling warmth of her fingers, then they were withdrawn.

The directness of this girl was a little disconcerting. She never ceased watching him, and her smiling eyes made him thoroughly aware that she liked what she saw. She didn't bother to employ the coy artifices to which most girls resorted.

Apparently she read his thoughts, for her next words came with a swift candor.

"You're wondering about me, Ed." Again she was direct. The use of his first name came easily and without embarrassment. "You're a stranger in town. Strangers always interest me—particularly when they're men."

She laughed, a low, musical sound. There was hidden amusement in it, too, as if she were playing some secret game with him.

Garry watched her, his admiration growing. She was bold, but it was not the boldness of a dance hall girl. Behind the quick, silvery laughter and behind the provocative olive-brown eyes was a distinct hint of breeding and firm character.

Suddenly he remembered Joel Benton, and the business that had brought him to Tumult. The smile left his face, and grimness came back.

"Yuh're Joel Benton's sister?" he inquired.

She nodded. Her lips quirked oddly at the corners.

"So you've met him. It didn't take long." She paused, faint amusement still tugging at her. "It never does. Joel's a big man here."

"How big?" Garry asked.

"You'll find out."

She spun around, then, and walked through a door which Garry figured led to the kitchen. He sat down at the table.

[*Turn page*]

Before long Claire emerged with a big plate on which were a succulent, browned steak and fried potatoes. She set it down in front of him, gave him a knife and fork and returned to the kitchen.

HE HAD started on the steak when Claire came back with a big slab of apple pie and a cup of steaming black coffee.

"That'll be one dollar," she said.

He dug down in his pocket, drew out a silver dollar, and handed it to her.

She pulled out a chair across the table from him, carefully arranged her green dress over which she now wore a big apron, and sat down. Garry put down his knife and fork, started to say something, but she cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"Don't bother about me. I like to watch men eat my cooking. Go right ahead. I won't even annoy you with conversation."

Garry, his slight discomfort soon wearing away, resumed eating with the relish of a man who has not tasted food for hours. He was just finishing his coffee when he saw Claire's glance leap with a sudden, sharp interest to the hotel lobby behind him. He turned in time to see Joel Benton striding into the dining room.

Benton's bigness was never more impressive than at the present moment. There was an arrogant swagger in his walk, and his blunt-fingered hands swinging so idly and casually past the gun-belt strapped around his waist were somehow suggestive of casual and indolent power.

Claire rose from her chair, her face composed.

"What now, Joel?" she asked lightly, almost tauntingly.

Benton's thick brows drew together in a frown of displeasure.

"Late for you to be here," he said.

"Ed had to eat," she told him.

Benton came up to the table, nodded curtly to Garry. He gave his sister a stiff, straight glance that told Garry he hadn't missed her use of his first name.

"Plenty of restaurants in town," Benton suggested. Claire's lips moved to speak, but Benton added gruffly, "Only the Wagon Wheel has better food. Am I right, Claire?"

If Benton expected Claire to look embarrassed, he was doomed to disappointment.

"Of course, Joel," she said. "You're always right."

"And you've been thinkin' the town needed a new man. So yuh decided to take over."

The malice in Benton's tone was unmistakable. But Claire laughed at him.

"Right again, Joel," she murmured. "And now I suppose it's your turn—to take over."

She looked directly at Garry, then walked coolly away.

"Mind if I set down?" Benton said, and took Claire's chair before Garry could reply.

For a moment the two men measured each other across the table. Except for that familiar tightness in his shoulders, Garry was cold and detached.

"Claire's a funny girl," Benton said abruptly. "She's bound to meet every new man that comes to Tumult."

Garry said nothing. Benton was beating around the bush. That was obvious. He hadn't come here to talk about his sister. But Garry gave him no help, waiting in wooden silence.

Benton regarded him carefully. Then he laid his big hands on the table, letting them slowly form into fists on the hard wood. His voice was oddly soft when he said:

"So yuh're lookin' for two men." He paused, as if searching his memory for their names. "Redwood and Northey. Have I got the names right?"

"Yeah," said Garry and watched the flicker in Benton's thin-lidded eyes. "Yuh know 'em?"

Benton lifted his broad shoulders in an idle shrug.

"Seems to me I've heard the names before. What do they look like?"

Garry was certain the big rancher was playing some game of his own, but he decided to string along for a while.

"Redwood," he murmured, "is a big hunk of man. All brawn and muscle. Well over six feet tall. Broad, ruddy face. Heavily marked from rough-and-tumble brawls. Northey is about yore height and mine. Light hair. Smooth features."

"Like a hundred men in this valley," Benton said.

"I reckon so." Their eyes met steadily across the table, but plainly both felt tension. "The descriptions help yuh remember?" Garry pressed.

"Afraid not." Abruptly the indifferent look went out of Benton's eyes. "Did Harley Masters give yuh anything, tell yuh anything before he was shot?" he asked quite suddenly.

GARRY felt a stir of excitement, but he said with a dry and cynical amusement. "I was wonderin' when yuh'd get around to that, Benton." And all the while he was thinking that Benton knew something about Redwood and Northey.

"What about it?" Benton prodded, a little too eagerly.

"Suppose yuh tell me what's goin' on here in Tumult?" Garry countered. "What was Harley Masters supposed to be carryin' that's so important to you and everybody else?"

"Yuh're doin' the talkin'," Benton snapped.

An edged smile touched Garry's lips, but they flattened out when he saw Benton's attention swing from him to the hotel lobby. He turned in time to see a wide-shouldered man stalk into the room. His heavy, ponderous tread shook the floor.

"Glad to see yuh, Eli," Benton greeted the man. "Just pull in?"

"Yeah, Joel." The big man stopped a few feet away, pointedly avoiding Garry's eyes. "It's a long ride."

Garry was positive that this idle talk was a cover for something hidden and unpleasant. There was a tingling sensation in the pit of his stomach, where the muscles were knotting.

"Garry, this is Eli Cresset," Benton said, by way of introduction. "Eli, meet Ed Garry."

The two nodded, and for the first time Garry had a close look at the big man. He was thick in the chest and shoulders. There was a high, wind-whipped color in his flat-nosed face. His lips were wide and overfull, a stubble of beard covered his cheeks, and his hair was russet-brown. It was when Garry noted the scars on Cresset's face that he felt excitement rush through him.

There was a knife scar running across the man's upper lip. His left eyebrow had been half ripped off in some past fight, and there was a round, puckering scar at the tip of his shelving jaw.

"Garry is a stranger in Tumult, Eli," Benton was saying. "There was a drygulchin' in town tonight, and Garry was with the man who got killed. Hombre by the name of Harley Masters—Janet's uncle."

Watching Cresset, Garry had a distinct impression that this was no news to the big man, though his stolid expression did not alter. But his huge arms and hands kept moving restlessly, and when Garry saw the unmistakable glint of brutality in Cresset's faded blue eyes—he knew what the next move would be.

He rose leisurely from the table. Every nerve and sinew screamed with tension. The threat of violence was a live thing in the hot stillness of the room. Benton was slyly smiling. Cresset was standing on wide-spread boots while his eyes narrowed.

"Yuh know a funny thing?" Garry asked Cresset, turning half away from Benton.

"What's that?" Cresset asked in a voice that was little more than a hoarse whisper.

"I've seen yuh somewheres before." Garry paused, then added savagely: "Or a picture of yuh."

Rage and fear were plain on Cresset's bruised, sullen features. He started toward Garry.

At that moment Benton yelled:

"All right."

CHAPTER VI

Tooth and Claw

CRESSET lunged. Garry stepped nimbly back. He struck the table edge, reaching for his gun. But Benton had come up behind him, and the weapon slid out of the holster before Garry's fingers could grip the stock.

Cresset caught him there, trapped against the table. The big man swung a looping right. Garry ducked, trying to block the blow, but it struck him high on the cheekbone. The force of it shook him up from head to toe. He went skidding backward over the table and fell with it to the floor while Cresset lumbered clumsily after him to finish the job.

Cresset's booted toe drove into Garry's ribs as he scrambled to his feet. He went off balance, falling forward on his face. Cresset threw himself on top of Garry, his huge hands groping for Garry's neck.

Eli Cresset's weight was like a gigantic heel, grinding the deputy marshal into the floor. Garry writhed and threshed, fighting to get free. Those big, steel-strong fingers kept groping, sliding over Garry's collarbone, seeking a purchase around Garry's throat.

Somehow Garry pried one arm free. He lurched forward along the floor, the point of his elbow ramming Cresset's windpipe. A hoarse, rasping breath tore from Cresset's wide-sprung mouth. His hold around Garry's neck loosened and Garry twisted away.

He got to his feet, retreating around the overturned table. Benton had moved aside out of range of the fight, his eyes eagerly watching Cresset pull himself up and go plunging after Garry.

The deputy marshal still felt light-headed from Cresset's first blow. The cords of his neck ached, too. He saw the wicked, animal light in Cresset's small, round eyes and knew precisely how this thing would be. There was no mercy in those piglike eyes. Cresset was set to crush him, maim him thoroughly—and he had the brute strength to do it.

Cresset swung at him from two feet away. Garry went inside the punch, letting it slide over his shoulder, and countered with a sharp left and right to the head. He put all of his power into those blows. But still the other man came on.

Another wild blow sailed past Garry's head. Then a leaden weight crashed into his mid-section, and he realized it was Cresset's fist. He felt a hot, searing pain as if he were burning up inside. Instinct carried him backward down the aisle between the tables. He heard a slight commotion in the lobby and was dimly aware of a dull undertone of talk.

Then the back of his legs struck a chair. He stumbled, caught himself and twisted sideward, kicking the chair toward Cresset. The big man lumbered forward, picked up the chair and swung it savagely at Garry's head. The rungs crashed against Garry's shoulder.

For just a moment he stopped retreating. The hot pulse of rage beat in him furiously. He lashed out with both fists. He saw the scarred, bearded blur of Cresset's face and pumped blow after blow at that stationary target. He waited for that face to fade away. But it stayed right there, savage and hideous with the evil impulse to destroy.

In that dim, despairing instant it occurred to Garry that he could not hope to survive if he fought with his hands alone. Cresset was inhumanly strong. Garry's blows rocked the man, but they could not beat down his tremendous strength, his power to absorb punishment.

Rock-hard knuckles broke through the deputy marshal's guard. They smashed against his jaw with a jarring, bone-shaking impact. He felt as if it had been torn off. There was a roaring in his ears. And suddenly his vision wasn't entirely clear. Blood had a warm, salty taste in his mouth.

He tried to move, but his legs were like lifeless stumps of wood. Cresset rushed in close, arms outstretched.

Desperately, Garry lowered his head and butted Cresset. Once, twice, three times his head crashed into the big man's jaw.

Cresset swayed drunkenly, hurt for the first time. But the animal urge inside him sent him plunging toward Garry again. Garry twisted aside. His thigh raked the side of a table. He threw out a hand for support. It skidded along the top, tipped over a sugar bowl.

His fingers clasped around the bowl. Cresset's leering face was very close now. Garry heaved the bowl. It smashed against the side of Cresset's face—and it stopped him. His arms dropped to his side.

Garry leaped forward and hit Cresset twice without a return. They were short, punishing blows with all of his weight behind them. They hammered at the big fellow's resistance. He skidded backward on his heels, dropped into a chair, and sent it splintering to the floor with him.

He rose slowly, but his eyes still held a feral, murderous glow. He charged, both arms pumping wildly.

A looping left caught Garry high on the head. He fell into the tangled wreckage of the broken chair. Cresset's driving boot struck him in the chest as he was getting up. He pitched backward, groped for a chair leg and scrambled away from the big man.

THE floor seemed to rise and fall in front of Garry when he rose. But he lunged at Cresset, the chair leg still gripped in his hand. He took a savage blow to the head, another under the heart. His body was one solid ache, and the endless roaring remained in his ears, but he swung the chair leg again and again. Each time the stick slammed against Cresset's head with a solid impact.

Somehow he remained on his feet, though, his fists still lashing out. Then Garry was inside, the stick gone, and he was throwing punches at that bruised and reddened blur in front of him. Until the blur was no longer there, and Cresset's massive body was sliding slowly down the wall to settle in a limp

huddle on the floor.

A wave of noise seeped into the dining room, then. The lobby shook to the thump of boots as a crowd of men pushed past the scattered tables.

Garry paid no attention to them. He swung around toward Joel Benton. His legs were not quite steady, and his breathing was rapid and irregular. An unruly lock of hair fell across his face, covering a livid bruise high up on his right cheekbone.

"Yuh buyin' any chips in this game?" he demanded of Benton.

Benton stood at ease a few feet away. His hands hung down at his sides. There was a queer, unfathomable shine in his blue eyes.

"No," he replied softly. "Not right now."

"No time like the present," Garry snapped.

Benton's attention traveled from Garry to the clamoring throng. Their high-pitched talk filled the room. Weed Toler appeared from the lobby, yelling for order. But Benton waved the entire crowd away.

"Clear out!" he growled. "I'll handle this."

"What about Cresset?" someone inquired.

"Leave him be. He'll come out of it. Get movin'." The men turned, grumbling, and wandered back toward the lobby. But Toler came on toward Benton, who snapped: "You, too, Toler. I'll see yuh later."

The heavy-jowled lawman stared at Benton in surprise, but finally about-faced and went out through the lobby.

"They jump for you, Benton, don't they?" Garry drawled, but there was a brittle edge in his voice. He took a stride toward the yellow-haired rancher. "Well, yuh're lookin' at one man who won't jump. The next time yuh try to run me out of town, play yore own hand."

Benton took the challenge in Garry's voice and words and, though his face flushed darkly, the features were set in an undisturbed calm.

"I'll think about that, Garry," he said smoothly. He glanced at Cresset. A low moan escaped the big man, but he did not stir. Benton grinned as he added: "Yuh know how to take care of yoreself. I never thought I'd see the man who could lick Cresset in a rough-and-tumble scrap."

Garry made no answer. He kept wondering why Benton had not pitched into the fight. He might have said more, but stopped as he saw Claire Benton. She passed through the lobby, came into the dining room, and halted near Cresset, then walked directly up to her brother and Ed Garry. As she looked at Garry, the same provocative challenge that he had seen when he had first met her was in her eyes. If she experienced any emotion at the sight of Cresset's bloody, bruised face she gave no sign of it.

"You did a thorough job," she told Garry. "Somehow I thought you would." Her eyes held an odd expression as she said that. But before Garry could cut in, she had turned with a taunting smile to her brother. "You made a wrong guess, didn't you, Joel?"

A sudden flare of anger shook Benton.

"I told yuh before to get out, Claire. I meant it." When she still lingered he added testily, "Bill Masters is lookin' for yuh. Did yuh forget yuh promised him yuh'd go ridin' with him?"

Claire looked at him innocently. "Why, no. But I had more important things to do."

She smiled at Garry, then turned and walked out of the room.

Cresset was stirring now. He pulled himself to a sitting position. His eyes were dull as they roved the room. For a moment he gazed at the deputy marshal without recognition. Then his vision cleared and a muttered oath broke from his split lips.

"This town could use a man like you," Benton said abruptly to Garry.

"The town or you?" Garry countered.

Benton shrugged. "Same thing." He studied Garry carefully. "How would yuh like a job as actin' sheriff?"

"What's the matter with Toler?"

"He's only the deputy. Jeff Lance is the sheriff, but he's been laid up for a couple months since he was thrown off a hoss."

The game was growing deeper, more involved. Garry saw the interest in Benton's face and kept his own expression hard and unyielding.

"You doin' Lance's work for him?" he asked.

"No," said Benton. "But he'll do what I say. And we need a man who can handle his fists and his guns to give the town some real law."

"Who for?" Garry snapped.

Benton remained unruffled. "Yuh'll see," he said calmly.

GARRY considered a moment, his thoughts racing. Right now he wanted only one thing. To force things to a quick showdown. He had to bring the trouble to a

head. The fight with Cresset had been one move. This offer of a job was another.

"If I take it, I'll start by throwin' Cresset in the calaboose," Garry said evenly.

Cresset had staggered to his feet now. He started toward the lobby, but turned slowly when Garry called him back. Then Garry ignored him and looked at Benton, his right hand extended.

"My gun, Benton."

The room was abruptly still again. Garry braced himself for a rush at the yellow-haired cowman. But Benton lifted the weapon out of his waist-band and passed it to the deputy marshal.

"Why do yuh want Cresset?" Benton asked.

"I want him out of the way."

"Yuh'll need to charge him."

"Assault will do."

Benton shook his head, color deepening in his face again.

"It's not enough. Besides, he's useful to me."

Garry's glance was dark and hostile.

"For jobs like tonight, I reckon," he said shortly, and waited for Cresset to come nearer. Then he fumbled in the breast pocket of his shirt and said harshly, "I'll change the charge. I'll make it murder and Federal mail robbery."

His hand emerged from his pocket and he threw his deputy marshal's badge on the table beside them. The lamplight glittered on the tarnished metal of the badge. Cresset's swollen, bearded face took on a gray, sickly pallor.

"This is the end of the trail for you, Redwood," Garry snapped.

He had his six-gun levelled at a point midway between Benton and Redwood so that it menaced both.

Benton's face was stiff with strain, surprise, and uneasiness.

"How do yuh know yuh've got the right man?" he demanded.

Garry fumbled in his pocket again and brought out a faded reward dodger. The photograph and the description below it tallied exactly with Cresset's appearance. Benton made no comment so Garry refolded the paper and put it back in his pocket. Then he looked at the outlaw and gestured toward the hotel lobby with his gun.

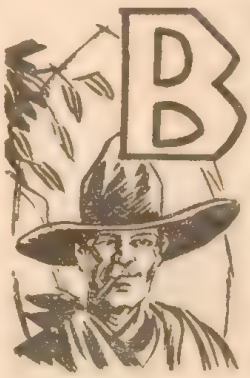
"On yore way, Redwood," he ordered. His eyes touched Benton briefly as he added, "You, too."

Benton flashed a mocking grin. "Am I under arrest?"

"No. I just want yuh in front of me."

CHAPTER VII

Sheriff Lance



BENTON shrugged and started to follow Redwood. The renegade moved clumsily up to Garry. He appeared to stumble over the shattered sugar bowl. Suddenly he pivoted and threw himself against the marshal. He drove a fist into Garry's middle and with his free hand knocked Garry's gun to the floor.

Garry staggered and fell against a table, then collided with Benton. All three men went down in a tangle of arms and legs. A gun roared close behind Garry. The single lamp in the room winked out. The reek of spilled oil filled the air.

A knotted fist slammed into Garry's face. He caught at Redwood's leg, felt the outlaw slide away while the gun kept bellowing in the darkness behind him.

Boots pounded along the dining room floor and out through the lobby as Garry scrambled to his feet. He tripped when a heavy body piled into him and rolled away. Outside someone yelled. There was the sound of galloping hoofs, then the babble of voices.

Garry rose again, stumbled through the gloom and out to the lighted lobby as a half-dozen men crowded into the hotel.

"What's up?" someone shouted.

Garry ignored the crowd and raced outside to the hitching rail. There was no sign of Redwood, not even a smell of risen dust as a brisk wind drilled down the street.

Two range-hardened men drifted down to the boardwalk.

"If yuh're lookin' for Cresset," one of them told Garry, "he ducked down the alley, goin' fast."

"What made him leave in such a hurry?" the other, a tall, blond puncher, queried. "Yuh must want him bad."

"I do," Garry snapped. "For murder and robbery."

"Murder? Are yuh shore?" At Garry's

nod the blond puncher shouted, "We'll round up a posse! Come on!"

Garry waved him away. "It can wait. Night time is no time for man-huntin'."

The punchers gave the marshal a puzzled look, but he said no more and turned back to Benton who had strode out to the gallery.

"That was mighty smooth, Benton," Garry murmured thinly.

Benton's lips lifted in a sly smile. "Too bad he got away."

Garry held out his hand. "Let's see yore gun."

The yellow-haired rancher hesitated, watching Garry's eyes. Then he lifted his Colt out of the holster and passed it to the marshal. Garry broke it open and examined it closely before handing it back.

"Three shots fired," he said succinctly. "One for the lamp and two to make noise."

Benton pretended bewilderment. "I don't follow yuh, Marshal," he said, with a mocking smile behind his bland eyes.

"I reckon I know where yuh stand now, Benton," Garry said. "I'll remember this night. We'll meet again. And Cresset, too."

Garry left Benton standing on the hotel gallery, walked past a dozen curious stragglers idling in the street, and entered the wide archway of the livery stable a few rods away. When the hostler emerged from his small cubbyhole of an office Garry asked him how to reach Sheriff Lance's home.

With the information he wanted, he hired a horse and rode out along the main wagon road for a half-mile. At the first fork in the road he swung left and continued over a slight rise to a white frame house nestled under a grove of cottonwoods.

There was a light in the front room so Garry rode up to the gate and dismounted, ground-hobbling his horse. He went through the gate, up to the door, and rapped. A stout, gray-haired woman with tired blue eyes and work-reddened hands answered the summons.

"Is the sheriff in?" Garry inquired, removing his hat.

The gray-haired woman glanced uneasily at Garry's bruised, dirt-grimed face and hesitated.

"Yes," she replied finally, and stood with the door half-open.

"It's business, ma'am," Garry told her, and produced his deputy marshal's badge. "Ed Garry is the name."

"Oh," she said, suddenly smiling. "I'm Mrs. Lance. We—we have to be careful, you know. Not everybody likes Jeff in this town." She opened the door wide, motioned him inside. "This way."

Garry tramped through the front room and on into a bedroom. Mrs. Lance smiled at the thin, wiry man propped up in the bed.

"Jeff, this is Mr. Garry, come to see you."

The aged sheriff shifted his position slightly while his wife patted out the pillow behind him. Then she retreated, leaving the two men alone.

"Howdy, Lance," Garry said, putting his hat down on a bureau beside the dresser.

"I was wonderin' when yuh'd show up," the sheriff said, and stuck out a bony, leather-skinned hand.

GARRY took it, amazed at the strength of the older man's grip. Yet there was a tired, wasted look about Lance. The sparkle had gone out of his eyes. His gray mustache looked stringy, and his cheeks were thin and hollow.

"News travels fast," observed Garry.

"I'm all busted up so I can't even get out of bed," the sheriff said. A bitter look crossed his face, then was gone. "But I have friends—and ways of findin' out things." He stopped, studying Garry's wide-shouldered frame, his bruised, sun-darkened features with the sure signal of hard capability shining through. He added musingly, "Yuh're one of Syl Darwin's men."

"That's right. Is it so plain to see?"

"To me, yes," said Lance. "I know Darwin well—rode with him many times. I know the kind of man he is—and the kind of man he likes to work with. Hard and tough—a little reckless, maybe, but fair and square, and afraid of nothin' that moves. Yore lickin' Cresset is proof of that."

"So yuh know about that, too."

Lance's blue-veined hands knotted above the white sheet.

"Doc Vinson was in the crowd that rushed into the hotel after the ruckus. He rode out a few minutes ago to tell me about it. Man, I'd like to have seen that fight."

Garry passed over the implied compliment.

"What yuh don't know," he said, "is that Cresset's real name is Colt Redwood and he's got a murder and Federal mail robbery charge hangin' over him."

"I've had him tagged as a renegade," Lance replied. "In fact, I've thought for a long while that he's the ramrod of the out-

laws hidin' in the Shadow Hills. But I was never able to pin anything on him." The sheriff's gaze centered keenly on Garry's face. "He's yore openin' wedge."

"Yeah. But I wasn't careful enough. He got away before I could lock him in the calaboose." Briefly Garry gave an account of Redwood's escape.

Lance frowned. "Benton again. I never liked the man. Why didn't yuh toss him in jail for interferin' with an arrest?"

"It would serve no purpose," Garry said. "Benton is more valuable to me free."

"Why?"

"So I can watch him. On the basis of Redwood's past deeds and tonight's events I'd make a guess that he's tied in with the rustlin' hereabouts—mebbe with the deaths of Salty and Harley Masters. Benton is in it, too, somewheres—and I mean to find out where, and how deep."

"I'm shore yuh're right about Redwood and the rustlin'," Lance agreed. "Only I've never been able to prove it. He ramrods a tough bunch of riders. His ranch is up in the Shadow Hills. The rustlers always drive the stole beefs toward them hills, but every time I've taken a posse to Cresset's—or Redwood's—place all I've found is a bunch of cows wearin' his registered brand, the Leanin' C."

"Probably well organized," said Garry. "They move the stolen critters over the divide fast. What about trails?"

"Rocky country up that way. Nothin' to foller for miles either side of the ranch. But them cows must pass through there."

"By the way," said Garry, "ever hear of an hombre named Northey?"

"No," the sheriff said promptly. "Are yuh after him, too?"

"Yeah. He's supposed to be Redwood's pard. They were ridin' the owlhoot together the last Syl Darwin back in Hobart heard of 'em. If Redwood is here, I'm certain I'll find Northey, too." He gave a brief description of Northey, then asked: "Mean anything to yuh?"

Lance shook his head. "I'm afraid not. There are a dozen men in Tumult who answer that description."

"Well, let it go."

Garry took a turn up and down the room, then came back and sat down. "Have all the outfits in Tumult lost beefs?" he asked.

"Most of 'em, though the Masters spread has been harder hit than the others." The sheriff regarded Garry shrewdly. "I understand yuh run into trouble the minute yuh reached town. Feel like tellin' me about it?"

Garry proceeded to give a full account of all that had happened from the time Harley Masters boarded the train until his fight with Redwood. Then before Lance could comment he asked another question.

"How does Hanald rate in town? He and Janet and Bill Masters had a run-in after the shootin'. Seems to be bad blood between the two outfits."

LANCE nodded vigorously.

"There is bad blood between 'em," he agreed. "It goes back a number of years. Hanald was one of the first settlers in the valley. Salty Masters came later and expanded fast. He hired a big crew and crowded Hanald off some of his range. There was a scrap. Masters caught a bullet in the shoulder and Hanald lost a foreman. That was about six months ago. Things quieted down for a spell. But the two outfits never stopped hatin' each other.

"Then, three weeks ago, Hanald tried to grab some of his old range where Jordan and Alamo Creeks come together. He'd had a line shack there and a barn and some corrals, but they're pretty run-down now. Anyhow, Hanald's crew was beat off. And the Big E punchers hazed three hundred of Hanald's Herefords into the hills. Hanald is still roundin' up the stragglers—and he threatens he'll be back to stay."

"In the saloon Bill Masters hinted that Hanald might have bushwhacked Salty Masters," Garry said. "What do you think of that?"

"Masters was shot in the back. We found him on the road between Tumult and the Big E." The sheriff searched his mind carefully and Garry knew he was trying to be honest in his judgment. "I've considered Hanald plenty of times, but somehow I can't see him shootin' anybody in the back."

"Two killin's," murmured Garry, letting his weight ease down in the chair while his eyelids moved down to veil his eyes. "Both in the back. Both of 'em named Masters. I've got a hunch that mebbe the same man killed Old Salty six months ago, and Harley Masters tonight."

For a moment the glances of the two lawmen met and held. Then Lance inclined his head.

"Yuh're right, Garry," he said. He pointed to a battered pine bureau behind the deputy marshal. "Look over there in the top drawer, right-hand side. Yuh'll find somethin' that'll interest yuh."

Garry rose, walked across the room, opened the bureau drawer and peered inside. Wedged in a corner he found two spent rifle bullets. He swung around, holding them in the palm of his hand.

"They look like thirty-thirty slugs," he said.

"That's what they are," the sheriff told him. "I've marked an 'S' on one of them That's the one I took out of Salty Masters. The other is from Harley Masters. Of course, yuh can't be too shore about such things, but I'd say they probably come from the same rifle."

The brief flare of elation that had swept through Garry at the confirmation of his hunch vanished as another consideration came to his mind.

"And I suppose every cowman and puncher in Tumult carries a Winchester in his saddle scabbard."

"Just about." Lance lifted his hands in a hopeless gesture. "So yuh see where that leaves us."

Then Garry remembered the boot heel he was carrying.

He drew it from his pocket and showed it to the sheriff.

"Mebbe this'll help," he suggested. "The man who tallied Harley Masters tonight left one of his heels in the alley under the saloon window. I'm goin' to keep a check to see who has repairs made on his boots durin' the next few days."

Lance turned the leather heel over in his hands, examining the brads, then gave it back to Garry.

"And if the man who lost that heel has several pairs of boots, he'll probably get rid of the ones he wore tonight."

"That's the chance I'll have to take," Garry said. "Also, I found marks in the dust left by the butt of the rifle. The killer's gun has a split butt. That may not be so hard to locate."

The sheriff's face showed that he still was depressed.

"What about that map yuh mentioned a while ago?" he asked.

"Here it is." Garry produced it and passed it to the lawman. "Mebbe you can find some meanin' in it. I shore can't."

CHAPTER VIII

The Lay of the Land

AS SHERIFF LANCE examined the scrawled lines on the folded paper a flush of excitement spread across his pallid gray face.

"Here yuh've got somethin'!" he said. "So Harley Masters gave it to yuh right before he was shot?" When Garry nodded, Lance went on, "This looks like a railroad map. Rumors have been floatin' around here for the past year that the Western Valley Railroad which runs through Rincon has been thinkin' of buildin' a spur line through Tumult, on across the Shadow Hills."

"Just because those wavy lines are on that paper don't mean they're supposed to be railroad tracks," Garry objected. This was no time for idle speculation.

Lance gestured Garry nearer to the bed, ran a trembling finger along the creased paper.

"That line on the left," he said, "follers the general direction of the main wagon road out of Tumult. But the other cuts right across most of the cattle outfits. I tell yuh it's probably a rough sketch of the route picked out for the railroad for the time bein'. I'd be ready to swear to it because Harley Masters was carryin' it—and he's been holdin' down a desk job with the railroad for several years."

"No wonder Janet was so interested in findin' out if Harley left any word or message for her," commented Garry.

"Yuh didn't tell her yuh had the map?" Lance asked.

"No. I wanted to see how things stacked up here first. Benton was mighty interested in Harley Masters, too."

"But how would he know Masters was carryin' the map?" Lance said wonderingly.

"Mebbe it was just a guess on his part." Garry's face grew grim and rock-hard. "It begins to look as if Masters knew in advance about the railroad, and was plannin' to tell Janet and Bill about it. Mebbe they wrote letters, and somebody got hold of one of the letters and decided to get the informa-

tion for himself while sealin' Harley Masters' lips for good."

Garry hesitated briefly while he marshaled his thoughts, exploring the formidable possibilities his theory presented.

"A railroad bein' built through Tumult," he went on after a moment, "would boom the value of every ranch in the valley. Just suppose one of the outfits got advance information about the route the railroad was goin' to foller, and started grabbin' all the range it could, figgerin' on sellin' a lot of it to the railroad for right-of-way at a high profit? And suppose that outfit didn't care too much about how it got the extra graze?"

"Yuh mean the killin' of Salty Masters and Harley Masters, as well as all the rustlin' might be part of a scheme to smash the Big E and some of the other spreads so's they could be picked up cheap?" Lance looked greatly disturbed.

"That's the way I peg it," Garry said. "It offers the strongest motive for all that's happened here durin' the last six months." A deep concern showed in his eyes. "Certainly, the Big E seems to be marked to go under. They've been the heaviest hit by the rustlers, and they've had two men killed. Who's in charge out there?"

"Janet, of course," said Lance.

"What about Bill?"

"He's Janet's cousin. Son of another brother of Salty's. His name was Luke. Don't know much about him except that I think he was once pardner in a ranch with Salty a long time ago when Janet and Bill was buttons. Salty and Luke split—some trouble about rustlin'. I never got the full story. Anyway, Salty shifted to Arizona while Luke stayed in Texas. Bill was about fourteen when Luke was killed in a gunfight. For a while Luke's widow tried to make a go of the spread, but a couple years' drought and some tough luck with blackleg, just about finished her.

"Salty hurried to Texas, managed to sell the spread, then took her and Bill back to Arizona. But she only lasted a year. I've heard that Salty put the little he got from the sale of the ranch in the bank in Bill's name. Bill grew up on the Big E. When he was twenty-one he insisted on having the money Salty had banked for him. He took it and started driftin'. Heard he tried ranchin' down in Mexico but got tangled up with one of them revolutionary outfits down there.

"The story goes that Bill lost most of the money old Salty had saved, gambling in the Texas Panhandle. Five years later he was back at the Big E with empty jeans. Salty took him on without a word. He never asked Bill what happened to the money. The story leaked out from Bill himself and some others."

Garry nodded slowly. "But Janet owns the ranch?" he asked.

"Yeah. She's the boss and don't think she don't let Bill know it. He's got no kick comin', though. He's a sort of foreman and draws good wages."

GARRY considered that information.

"In other words," he finally said, "if Janet should die, the Big E would be at the mercy of whatever outfit is maneuverin' for power in Tumult."

That hit the sheriff like a physical blow.

"I never thought of that!" His voice shook. "What can we do? Keep a deputy near Janet all the time?"

"No. That would tip our hand. My plan is to keep a secret watch on the Big E and force the whole thing out into the open pronto."

Ed Garry got up, shook hands with the old sheriff, and left, to ride back to Tumult. He had something to work on now. . . .

At eight o'clock the next morning Garry came down to the hotel dining room for breakfast. He was oddly disappointed when a red-headed waitress told him that Claire Benton had taken the day off. He became more taciturn than usual and rushed through his ham and eggs and coffee.

Leaving the Wagon Wheel, he visited the two boot makers in town to exhibit the heel he had found and to inquire if anyone had ordered a set of new heels. The answer in each case was no, so he wandered down to the livery stable.

After learning from the hostler how to reach the Masters' ranch as well as Joel Benton's B in a Box, he rented a big bay gelding and rode out of town. For two miles the road ran arrow-straight across a wide meadow. Then it swung in a loop toward the north. Garry reined the gelding into a narrow trail that angled northwestward over a series of rolling hills.

The sky was a pale, clear blue with occasional fleecy cloud banks drifting lazily toward the horizon's edge. Heat was on the land. Sweat pasted Garry's shirt to his skin.

He climbed a steep grade, then followed a

barren ridge for more than a mile with the sun baking the earth and rocks a dull slate-brown. Before long, the ground sloped away to a wide bowl filled with curling bunch grass. A shallow-banked arroyo wound through the glade, and Garry rode into it, following the sandy bed until it veered to the north. Then he climbed out, swinging the bay toward a green line of timber a mile away.

He kept going through the deep, silent corridors of the pines until he emerged upon a great fifty-acre meadow. Here the grass was green and luxuriant and watered by a creek that glittered like a great winding streak of silver in the brazen sunlight.

A big bunch of Herefords grazed along both sides of the stream. Garry glimpsed the Big E brand on several cows.

At last he found himself atop a low, wooded knoll. He pulled up behind a thick clump of chaparral, staring down at the sprawling ranchhouse and out-buildings of the Big E.

The trail dipped straight down the slope, crossing a crude plank bridge spanning the creek which, at this point, cut a half circle around the ranch before plunging out of sight through a tunnel of low-hanging willows and alders.

Garry waited there, dismounting to loosen the cinch to let the bay blow. He saw a couple of punchers breaking horses in a peeled pole corral a hundred yards beyond the ranchhouse. Then he saw Janet walk out of the house, amble toward the corral and linger near the gate to watch a lanky puncher tangle with a rawboned roan.

Even at this distance there was something magnetic and compelling about Janet's slim, straight figure. She carried herself with an assurance that was remindful of a high wind singing through the majestic trees of a mountain forest.

At last Garry tightened the cinch and climbed back into saddle. Pushing on across the ridge, the trees closed around him and he rode for several miles through a shadowy world.

Near noon he sighted a bunch of B in a Box cows grazing along the slopes of a boulder-strewn hillock. Half an hour later the headquarters buildings came into view.

The ranch was backed solidly against a narrow, sixty-foot bluff. Halfway up the rock face of the cliff a spume of water frothed out, dropping into some pool out of range of Garry's vision.

The two-story log and stone ranchhouse had been constructed on a terrace. Along the eastern side of the building the land fell away sheer and sharp to a deep gully that ran back to the bluff, followed it for thirty feet or so and finally turned its sloping edge to wander off into the brush. The corrals and bunkhouse had been thrown up on the flat ground west of the ranchhouse.

AGAIN Garry was content with studying the physical aspects of the ranch and filing them away in his mind. Then he pushed on at a leisurely pace, swinging southeast. He was headed now in a direction that would bring him to a point between the present Big E boundary and the range occupied by Leo Hanald and his small crew.

His first glimpse of Broken Spur land showed him a rocky region, sparsely covered with grass, and hilly. It was not good graze and Hanald's beefs gave proof of the rancher's losing struggle against nature.

Moving downgrade through a low-walled canyon, Garry struck a rutted wagon road which he followed for a mile before it connected with another road that led straight back to a small unpainted ranchhouse, a ramshackle barn and a log bunkhouse.

A lone puncher sat on a wooden bench outside the bunkhouse, his back bent as he patched a saddle. Garry searched for other signs of activity, but there was none, so he rode on.

Twenty minutes later he emerged from a tangle of mesquite and greasewood and started across a meadow that narrowed almost to a point at the junction of two creeks. An old line shack and lean-to, and an abandoned corral near the bank of the larger stream told Garry that was undoubtedly part of the Masters' East Fork range. The mountain branches, therefore, must be Jordan and Alamo Creeks. One stream flowed out of a thin stretch of woods. The other wandered straight across the meadow, meeting the first creek near the remnants of a plank bridge which some flood had washed away.

Garry rode toward the cabin, observing the lush green grass under the bay's plodding hoofs. No wonder Hanald had made a try for this land. It surpassed, by far, any of his own pastures.

There was an abandoned well beside the shack. A gaping hole in the earth, partially

covered by a few planks, still showed the black gleam of water as Garry peered down into it. Nearby was a huge block of granite. It must once have been used as a cover, but now it lay shattered in two ragged, broken sections.

Crossing the smaller of the two creeks, by a shallow ford, Garry traversed the far meadow. And gradually, as he rode, grim discontentment filled him.

He had spent almost a full day, riding from pillar to post, to get the layout of the important ranches clearly cataloged in his mind. Yet all the while he had been conscious of time going to waste, of sinister forces in this valley, forces which might well get beyond his control because he had too little knowledge on which to base a definite plan of action.

CHAPTER IX

Smart Girl

ED GARRY'S mood underwent an abrupt change when a rider appeared at the other end of the glade. It was Claire Benton. She waved to him gaily. Garry politely removed his hat and rode up to her.

"So you've had your look at the country," she said. "Too late now for me to offer my services as a guide."

"I wish yuh had," Garry replied gallantly, "I was lookin' for yuh this mornin' in the hotel dinin' room."

"Were you?" she asked, with a sudden earnestness.

For a moment he had a glimpse of something intense in her eyes. Then it was gone, and she was smiling again, gaily, provocatively. Without a word she turned her horse and rode slowly beside him along the trail.

The sun was sinking low in the west, and the clouds that hung lazily above the distant mountain crags were tinged with pale bands of pink and mauve. The cool of evening began to touch the land.

"Have you picked your side yet, Ed?" she asked, after a few moments.

"A marshal has to play these things straight down the middle," he answered. "That's the way I intend to play the game here."

"Suppose you can't?"

"When that happens I pull up stakes or toss in my badge."

"Any ideas as to who shot Harley Masters?" she asked.

"No," said Garry. "Have you?"

"I wish I did," she said. "I'd like to help."

Her eyes were suddenly soft, her lips gently smiling, making Ed Garry decidedly aware of her, and a certain power she had to appeal to his senses. Her nearness now sent a swift, warm wave coursing through him.

He felt confused and ill at ease. He looked away from her, probing in his shirt pocket for his cigarette papers and tobacco. A folded paper creased and rattled under his fingers, subconsciously reminding him that he was still carrying the map Harley Masters had given to him.

As he pulled out the sack of Durham an edge of the map protruded from the pocket. He shoved it back. He knew that Claire was watching him, her eyes at once warm and faintly mocking.

He shook some tobacco from the sack onto one of the cigarette papers. Deftly he pulled the strings of the sack together with his teeth and dropped it back in his pocket with one hand. Then he rolled the paper over the tobacco, moistening both ends with his tongue, put the quirly in his mouth and lighted it.

As smoke spilled from his nostrils, and he felt more at ease. Claire's soft laugh close beside him made him twist around in the saddle.

"Feel better now, Ed?" she queried.

Her lovely tanned face was tilted toward him so that he saw the smooth arch of her throat, saw the grace of her slender body in the tight blouse she wore.

"What do yuh mean?" he asked, his voice a little unsteady as he fought against the rising tide of feeling that pulsed through him like the steady beat of a drum.

Claire laughed again, a soft, mellow laugh, like a brief caress.

"Ed, you're not so hard, after all," she murmured.

Suddenly he grinned, pushed his horse against hers, his arms went out and he pulled her close. The laugh was still trembling on her lips, as his own came down on them, hard and demanding. He felt her hands

slide up to his shoulders.

The sound of hoofbeats made them draw apart as a horseman rushed out of the trees —Bill Masters. And the savage twist of his lips, his slitted eyes proved that the young ranch foreman had seen that embrace.

Masters came on at a gallop, skidding his horse to a halt a few feet away from Garry and Claire.

"Have yuh had enough?" he rasped angrily, one hand near his holstered gun.

Garry felt the blood rush to his face. But Claire answered with a calmness that was amazing.

"Are you, by any chance, talking to me, Bill?" she asked icily.

"No!" Masters snapped, jealousy eating like a corrosive acid. "I'm talking to Garry." He faced the deputy marshal squarely. "Just because yuh walked over Toler and Cresset in town last night don't give yuh free rein over everyone and everything else on this range. Claire, here, for one!"

"If you're bothered about what you just saw," Claire said hastily, "you'd better forget it." Her face showed her annoyance as she whipped out at Masters, "Maybe you think I'm wearing your brand. Get the idea out of your head, Bill. I like you a lot, but I'll ride with whomever I please."

"And kiss 'em, too?" Masters demanded hotly.

"Why, yes, if it pleases me."

THE promptness of her reply shook Masters. And he was not relishing the anger in her eyes. His hand moved in a gesture almost of supplication. Then he drew it back and glared at Garry.

"I've said it before,, and I'll say it again! You won't last in this valley. Yuh're askin' for a bullet in the back!"

"Who's goin' to put it there?" Garry said quickly. "You?"

Masters colored again. His shoulders shook and the urge to draw his gun was a bright, hungry banner in his eyes. Then Claire cut in.

"I think you've said quite enough, Bill. The country's free and Ed Garry's welcome to ride with me when it's his pleasure." She spoke bluntly, seeing the anguish in Bill Masters' features, and not caring. Then she gave Garry a strained smile. "And now, good-by, Ed—for a little while."

Garry was glad to take his dismissal. He disliked emotional scenes, and the magic of his brief moment with Claire had vanished. He lifted his hat and rode off toward town. . . .

Lamplight was throwing its yellow beams of radiance across the dust of Tumult's streets when Garry rode into the livery stable and left the winded bay gelding with the hostler. Garry strode through the high archway and went along to the Mercantile where he purchased a new shirt before heading for the hotel.

Up in his room he locked the door and hauled off his soiled shirt. He tossed it carelessly on the bed, then remembered his sack of Bull Durham and the map. He drew out the tobacco, then probed deeper into the pocket, seeking the map.

It wasn't there. A slow, uneasy anger rolled through him. For he distinctly remembered that the map had been in his pocket when he had fashioned that quirly after meeting Claire Benton.

Instantly he knew where the map had gone. Claire was smarter than he had estimated. She had provoked him into kissing her. And apparently it had all been part of a game. A shrewd game in which Claire had pumped him about his activities—and lifted the map from his pocket during their embrace.

He realized now that he had underestimated Joel Benton. The B in a Box owner had fished for information about Harley Masters, and Garry's own reason for coming to Tumult. And he had set the big renegade, Colt Redwood, upon him. And though he had failed on both counts he hadn't bought chips in the fight between Garry and Redwood. The reason was that he still had a card to play—his attractive sister, Claire.

Well, the map was at the B in a Box by this time, and the game was getting out of hand.

Garry washed his face and hands, then looked into the cracked, dirt-specked mirror at two black-and-blue patches on his left cheekbone. There was a cut inside his lip, too—all mementos of his encounter with Redwood.

He kept wondering if the Bentons had known what to look for. What connection, if any, did they have with the deaths of Salty and Harley Masters? And how much would that railroad map mean to them?

There was only one way to find out the answers. That was to ride to the B in a Box.

He had no illusions about Claire Benton now. She had used him, cleverly and shrewdly, and she would use him again, if

she got the chance. And he had no illusions about Joel Benton. The man was dangerous. A far-seeing mind operated behind his arrogant features. He wielded tremendous influence in the town and, no doubt, desired to wield more. Possession of the railroad map and the unlimited possibilities it opened up would provide a powerful wedge toward control of the valley.

Ed Garry slipped into his fresh shirt, adjusted his gun, then tramped out of the room.

He had supper in the hotel dining room, eating quickly, then walked out to the street. A strong wind from the hills buffeted him. It felt cool and invigorating despite the taint of dry dust that traveled with it.

Garry stopped in at the Mercantile again. He bought some rope, strode down to the livery stable, and hired another horse. This time the hostler brought out a big chestnut. Garry draped the lariat over the horn and swung aboard.

Two miles beyond the town limits he angled into the narrow trail he had taken in the morning. The country grew more rugged as the miles sped by. He skirted a portion of the Big E upper meadow, the lush grass pale and ghostly in the moonglow. Far off on his right he saw the wide V notch of a canyon.

SUDDENLY he noticed a faint haze above the canyon. At the same instant he heard the rumble of pounding hoofs. The sound grew steadily in volume, echoing and reechoing through the hills.

Even as Garry watched, a dark mass poured out of the gorge and into the meadow. The mass heaved and rocked, sweeping toward him at a rapid pace. It was a herd of cattle being driven hard and fast.

Excitement ran through Garry. Only rustlers would push beefs at such a rapid pace.

He swung the chestnut into the brush, moving in and out through scattered clumps of mesquite. The cattle came on swiftly. A horseman, riding point, swerved toward the north and another rocky defile at the far end of the glade. Swing riders hove into view, herding the stragglers back to the bunch.

Garry pushed the chestnut into a fast run. Horse and rider went crashing through the trees, angling for the mouth of that distant canyon. The thunder of hoofs engulfed the night. Dust rose in great clouds, half-obscuring the moon's silvery light.

The first of the cattle drifted into the gorge. Horns clacked against horns and the fierce bawling of the cows mingled with the yells and shouts of the riders hazing them along.

Garry crashed on through the brush, the racket of the stampeding herd drowning out the clatter of his approach. He came to the edge of a thicket and pulled the chestnut to a halt.

After a few minutes the cattle began to thin out. A lone rider who was posted at drag was hazing some stragglers back into line. Garry grabbed his rope, fashioned a loop and shook several lengths of rope out along the ground.

CHAPTER X

Caught Red-Handed

WAITING tensely, the loop dangling in his hand, Ed Garry watched the last of the beefs trot past him. He saw the drag rider come up at a fast gallop. A bandanna covered the lower portion of the man's face. Garry centered his attention on that bandanna as he sent his rope whistling out into space.

The rider jerked upright as the loop settled over his shoulders and arms. He twisted savagely around in the hull, fighting the rope and trying to get his hands free. But Garry dabbed the other end of the lariat around the horn, sent the chestnut rearing backward and hauled the rider out of saddle.

Garry jumped to the ground and ran to the fallen rider. The wind had been knocked out of the man, and he offered no resistance when the deputy marshal dragged him to a sitting position.

The chestnut whinnied at the edge of the brush. Garry lifted his head and stared warily around the clearing. The chestnut was facing a tangle of brush and low trees that formed the northern boundary of the meadow about sixty yards away.

Garry watched that brush tensely, his hand on the butt of his six-gun. The thunder of the driven cattle had diminished to a faint,

muted rumble. Then the chestnut turned away and lowered its head to nibble at some young grass shoots. The other horse had drifted near and was grazing, too, the worn reins trailing.

There was no movement and no sound in the brush, yet a certain disquietude lingered with Garry.

His attention was suddenly jerked away from those trees when the rustler lunged to his feet and butted Garry in the chest. Garry stumbled backward, took a looping right to the side of the jaw. Then he countered with a stiff left to the face. And when he saw the rustler dig for his gun, his own weapon leaped miraculously into his hand. There was the swift, sharp glitter of moonlight on polished gun metal, then Garry's Colt barrel clipped the renegade over the ear.

The rustler sagged, drifting back a step or two until his feet got entangled in the loosened rope, before he finally fell in an awkward heap in the dust.

He got to his knees, then sat down hard as the bandanna slid away from his features. Garry started in surprise when he recognized the freckled features of Kyle Freeling, segundo of the Big E Ranch.

"Don't the Masters pay yuh enough wages, so yuh have to rustle their beefs?" Garry demanded.

Freeling dragged air into his laboring lungs, and his face with its blue-black stubble of a day-old beard was strained and ugly.

"Yuh're wastin' yore time, Garry," he growled. "I'm not talkin'."

"I think yuh will, Freeling—before I'm finished with yuh," Garry promised tightly, and the ominous pause which followed the words pulled Freeling's glance quickly to Garry's face.

"What yuh mean?" he demanded.

"Quit stallin'," Garry snapped. "You know why I'm in Tumult. To get to the bottom of a lot of things, including rustlin' and murder. I couldn't see the brands on those beef critters, but they have to be Big E steers. There's no other place they could have come from in that direction. Somebody in this valley is tryin' to smash the Masters outfit. One shore way of doin' that is to run all the steers off Big E range. I just want a few things from you. First, where are those beefs headed? Second, who is behind the rustlin'? Redwood?"

"Don't know who yuh're talkin' about," Freeling growled.

"People in Tumult know him better by the name of Cresset," Garry said, and when Freeling still remained silent, Garry added in a harsher tone, "He's the man I want. Am I right? And who gives him orders? Joel Benton?"

Strength was returning to the *segundo*. With it came a growing and contemptuous defiance.

"Go to blazes, tin-star!" he grated.

Garry's temper suddenly became hot flame leaping inside him. He leaned down, grabbed a fistful of Freeling's shirt and hauled the foreman to his feet. Freeling struck out at him, his knuckles raking Garry's mouth. Then Garry's fist thudded into his face, propelled him to the ground again.

"Get up!" Garry ordered, rage making his voice taut.

The *segundo* rose sluggishly. He circled Garry. Garry moved toward him. Freeling made another frantic grab for his gun, but Garry reached him in one bound. His right arm moved in a swift, savage arc. Knuckles crashed against the side of Freeling's face and he went down.

HE LAY writhing on the ground while Garry stood over him, his face somber. He had no liking for this deliberate beating of a man, but time was running out on him here in Tumult. He needed facts. And he needed them fast to combat the trouble that he was sure was building up to a hideous climax.

It took a tremendous effort for Freeling to rise this time. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth. An ugly lump was rising beneath his left eye. He looked dazedly at the big deputy marshal.

"Freeling," Garry went on relentlessly, doggedly, "I want information, and I want it now. Who are the men behind this rustlin', and what do you know about the deaths of Salty and Harley Masters? Speak up or yuh'll get more of the same."

Once more Freeling glanced at Garry. The lawman's features were hard and implacable.

"All right," said Freeling reluctantly. "You win. I'll—"

Again the chestnut whinnied. Garry whirled toward the screen of brush just as a rifle shot smashed out through the night's stillness. He saw the ruddy blossom of flame, heard the thump of the bullet tearing into Freeling's back. He saw Freeling reel and fall like a limp rag doll.

Then he was plunging toward the *segundo's* horse. The hidden marksman fired again, but the rifle slug whizzed harmlessly past. Garry laid two quick shots upon that distant flicker of muzzle light, and realized that the range was too long for Colt fire to be effective.

The rifle blared again. Dust spurted up at Garry's feet as he reached Freeling's horse, got his hand on the saddle carbine and hauled it clear. He slapped the animal on the rump and ducked back toward the trees, the ambusher following him with two more fast shots.

As Garry reached the brush he dropped flat. He thrust the carbine out in front of him, levered a shell into the firing chamber and let go. He got a quick return and rolled to one side as a bullet ripped through a tangle of leaves four inches away from his face.

The scarlet flicker of flame from the bushes across the draw was a clear target, and he peppered the area with a half-dozen shots. He heard a crackling in the chaparral, followed by the distinct thud of hoofs, which told him clearly enough that the drygulcher was fleeing.

For a moment Garry thought of pursuing the mysterious marksman, but thought better of it. This was rough country. Despite the bright moonlight he would run the risk of plunging into another ambush if he tried to follow the rider into the timber.

Still gripping the saddle carbine, Garry went back to Freeling. The Big E *segundo* had not moved. He was lying on his face, and there was a bullet-hole between his shoulder-blades. Garry turned him over, felt hopelessly for a pulse in the man's wrist. There was not even a flutter of motion. Freeling was dead. And whatever information he had been about to reveal was forever lost.

With considerable caution Garry crossed the meadow to the screen of brush and hunted around until he came to where the ambusher had been concealed. Striking a match, he cupped the flame in his hands and searched the ground. In three minutes he found what he was looking for—a soft spot in the dirt, the scuffed prints of a man who had waited there for a considerable time. And over near a clump of mesquite he noted a narrow depression in the earth. It was rounded and even, except in the center where a thin, raised strip of dirt showed.

The killer with the split rifle butt, the man who had murdered the two Masters brothers had scored again!

In a little more than an hour, Garry pulled into the ranch yard of the Big E spread. The worn planks of the bridge spanning the creek telegraphed his approach to the men in the bunkhouse. Someone flung the door open. Half a dozen of the crew left the bunkhouse and moved across the dust toward the foot of the veranda steps where Garry halted when he rode up.

He was swinging down from the saddle when the front door of the ranchhouse opened and Janet and Bill Masters appeared.

"Who's there?" Bill Masters demanded, his hand streaking to his hip. "Sing out!"

"Garry."

Rage choked Masters. "Move on! There's no welcome for yuh here."

The horse Garry had been leading was hidden from Bill Masters' range of vision by a veranda post and also by Janet's slender figure as she stepped in front of him.

"Wait," she called over her shoulder to Bill, and ran on down the steps.

"Who is that?" she demanded unsteadily, her glance settling on the dark, limp mound draped across the saddle of the second horse.

THE Big E hands were crowding up. One of them went around the horse, lifted the renegade's head. He backed away quickly and a sickly look passed over his thin face.

"It's Kyle Freeling!" he announced in a hollow voice.

Bill Masters shoved past Janet, saying, "Better stay there," and went to the horse where two punchers, having untied the ropes, were carefully easing Freeling's lifeless body out of the saddle.

"Carry him to the bunkhouse," Bill Masters directed.

He turned back to Garry, and there was an excited gleam in his eyes. The deputy marshal, studying him, could see that there was rage in Masters' eyes, yet it was leavened by something sly to which Garry could not put a name.

"He was shot in the back," Masters said.

"Yeah," Garry answered. "Just like the others."

Masters stiffened. There was shock in Janet's white face. She was showing the iron control over her emotions she had exhibited when her uncle had met his death. But now

[*Turn to page 42*]

TERRY TRAPPED THE ALIEN SMUGGLERS AND THEN . . .

HURRYING TO REACH HER UNCLE'S CAMP ON LAKE HURON BEFORE DARK, BETTY ADAMS STUMBLES UPON MYSTERIOUS DOINGS IN WATKINS COVE

SMUGGLERS!

HERE'S YOUR CUT, CORBETT . . . THREE HUNDRED BUCKS. GUIDE 'EM TO TONY'S SHACK AND YOU'RE THROUGH

OKAY, LOUIE. ANOTHER LOAD TOMORROW NIGHT?

HANDS UP!

YOU CAN SEE WHY I HAD TO COVER YOUR MOUTH . . . ONE PEEP WOULD HAVE SPOILED OUR SHOW

GRACIOUS! AND THE "SIGNALER" IS YOUR MAN!

SENATOR CONGDON'S CAMP, MISS? WHY YOU'RE THREE MILES OUT OF YOUR WAY

COME BACK TO BORDER PATROL HEADQUARTERS AND I'LL DRIVE YOU OVER

DO YOU MIND IF I USE YOUR PHONE? UNCLE HARRY MAY BE WORRIED

GO RIGHT AHEAD. MEANWHILE, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I'LL CLEAN UP

THIS BLADE'S A HONEY . . . THREE DAYS' WHISKERS GONE LIKE MAGIC!

THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING, TERRY

WHY, UNCLE, DO YOU KNOW MR. CORBETT?

KNOW HIM? WHY MAJOR CORBETT WAS MY BEST INTELLIGENCE OFFICER!

I'D BEEN PLANNING TO VISIT YOU AFTER I CRACKED THIS CASE, COLONEL . . . I MEAN SENATOR

YOU GET SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES IN JIG-TIME WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD, AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY, YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. USE THIN GILLETTES

THIN Gillette BLADES 4 for 10¢

she had seen entirely too much tragedy, too much of sudden death. The cumulative effects of those disasters were shattering the shell of her reserve.

She gazed in a trancelike fashion at Bill as he whipped out his gun.

"Let's have the story," Bill said to Garry. "Make it good, and make it straight."

Garry looked at Masters levelly. "I warned yuh never to draw a gun on me. Put it away."

"Like fun." Masters was wickedly grinning. He lifted his gun, centered the sights on Garry's chest. "Yuh can't hide behind yore badge here. I want to hear yuh talk, and if yore story ain't good—"

"Put up yore gun," Garry snapped.

He was a big, heavy shape standing there in the yard, half-touched by moonlight, half-touched by the yellow lamplight flooding out of the wide front windows of the ranchhouse. Angered as he was, reckless, too, now, he had no fear of their guns, no thought for his own safety. He stood there solid, defiant and thinly smiling until Janet broke from the trance of shock which had gripped her.

"The pride in you is a powerful thing," she said to Garry tightly. "Some day it will kill you."

"Stay out of this, Janet," Bill ordered gruffly.

"No," she insisted. "Can't you see? You can't break this man's will to your own, Bill. If you want his story, holster your gun. Don't worry. He didn't kill Freeling. This is another back-shooting."

The faint, hard smile remained on Garry's lips.

"Thanks," he said to Janet. "Didn't know yuh'd changed sides."

Angry color flooded Janet's cheeks.

"Don't take too much for granted," she said sharply. "You've got some talking to do, and we're ready to listen."

"So yuh don't think I shot Freeling," Garry said musingly. "And what about yore uncle, Harley Masters?"

"You're in the clear on that, I reckon," she said. "Except for one thing."

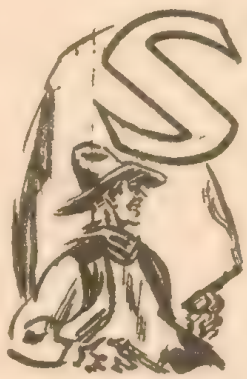
"And that?"

"I still think Uncle Harley gave you some message for me."

Bill Masters crowded forward. "All right, Janet," he said, then swung toward Garry. "My hogleg is put away. Now let's hear about Freeling."

CHAPTER XI

More Back-Shooting?



STARING Bill Masters straight in the eye, Deputy Marshal Ed Garry stood his ground.

"First, one question," he said to the angry Masters. "Yuh miss any cattle tonight?"

"What has Big E beef to do with Freeling?" Bill asked.

"Plenty," said Garry. He told about reaching the meadow between the two granite-walled canyons, then hearing the thunder of hammering hoofs.

"I pulled off into the brush," he added, "And saw some riders drivin' about three hundred head of cattle. No workin' cowhands would haze critters at the rate of speed those cows were bein' driven. The one answer was—rustlers. I waited for the drag rider to come up and roped him out of saddle. That rider was Freeling, yore *segundo*. I started to question him about who was behind the raiders, but before he could talk a rifle shot from the brush dropped him in his tracks."

Bill Masters sneered in disbelief. "That's a likely story."

"That's the way it happened," Garry snapped. "You check yore beefs in the mornin' and I'll wager yuh'll find about three hundred head missin'."

"It's hard to believe Freeling would doublecross us that way," Janet murmured. "And why was he shot?" Her eyebrows drew together in a frown. Then a sudden, shocking thought came to her. "Could it have any connection with—"

Garry nodded grimly. "I'm shore it does have a connection with the deaths of yore father and yore uncle."

Bill Masters' voice leaped at Garry like the slap of a swinging palm.

"How do yuh know? Yuh'd better have a reason for sayin' that."

"I have." Garry met Masters' glance until Bill dropped his eyes. "I shot it out with the bushwhacker, but he rode off into the timber. However, he left his special mark behind him."

"What's that?"

"The mark of a split rifle butt in the dust. The same mark I saw in the alley beneath the saloon window. Yuh begin to get the drift. Three men. All from the Big E. All shot in the back."

Shadows of dread and uncertainty were in Janet's eyes.

"You mean?" she choked, and could not complete the ugly sequence of her thoughts.

"I mean somebody here in Tumult is out to smash the Big E," Garry declared. "And he's not stoppin' at murder. Who's next? You or Bill?"

"Cut that out," Bill snapped. "Janet's gone through enough without gettin' her all worked up about herself."

"It's all right, Bill," Janet said. Her face was white now, but not with fear. It was the white of a wild defiance, such as Garry had glimpsed in the saloon the night of Harley Masters' murder.

"You're perfectly right, Marshal," she said to him. "We've been blind not to have seen it before."

The rataplan of hoofs broke in, and they saw a rider come racing down the road. When the horse galloped across the plank bridge, they saw that the rider was hanging to the animal's flying mane in a desperate attempt to stay in the saddle.

Horse and rider came on rapidly across the yard.

"It's Dave Arden!" someone yelled. "And he's hurt."

The horse skidded to a halt in front of the veranda. The sudden, jolting stop sent the puncher twisting out of saddle. Two of the hands rushed forward to catch him and help him regain his feet.

Arden's gaunt face was covered with blood and dirt. A wide, dark stain was on his shirt around his left shoulder. His bleared eyes sighted Janet.

"Rustlers—got north herd—Miss Masters!" he blurted in a weak, halting voice. "I—shot out of saddle—came to—rode here. . ."

"Get him into the house," Janet said quickly. She singled out another rider. "Go into town for Doc Vinson."

She watched two punchers help the wounded man into the house, then turned back to Garry.

"That's proof enough for me," she said, her manner strained and tense. "So somebody is out to break us. All right. From now on we fight back. I'll double my crew—hire gun-hands!"

"Good idea," said Garry. "But what about yoreself? You own the Big E. If you wanted this ranch and didn't care how yuh got it, who would yuh go after?"

"No one but you, yourself, Janet," Bill Masters broke in. "Don't yuh remember? They've already tried. That busted cinch on yore mare." As he looked at Garry, his expression was almost friendly. "Couple of weeks ago Janet was thrown from her hoss. We found the cinch had been almost cut through with a knife. Luckily she was only shaken up."

"Who found out the cinch had been tampered with." Garry asked.

"Arden—the waddy who just rode in," said Bill Masters.

GARRY considered that information carefully. After a moment he looked at Janet. His awareness of her close beside him had been steadily growing. As he saw the red of her lips, the smooth curve of her eyebrows he felt an odd, tingling sensation.

Suddenly she noticed his interest and a delicate pink stained her cheeks. Her glance, when she lifted her eyes to his face, hit him with the shock of an electric current.

"That's all, I reckon," she murmured, in a voice unlike her usual tones. "The next time the Big E will be ready when trouble breaks." She purposely avoided Garry's eyes now. To her cousin she added, "We'll send some of the boys to pick up the trail of those stolen cattle in the morning."

"It won't do any good," Bill Masters growled. "The trail will disappear in the malpais up in the Shadow Hills. All we'll find will be a herd of legally branded cows around Cresset's mountain ranch."

"Leave the stolen beef to me," Garry said, then looked at Janet. "Might be wise for you to stay in town till this is cleared up."

"Are you crazy?" she flared. "This is my ranch. Nobody is chasing me off of it!"

"I'm thinkin' of that busted cinch—and of Freeling and yore uncle. The man who got them may try again."

Janet tossed her curly dark head.

"I hope he does," she said vehemently, "I'll be ready and waiting!" The warmth went out of her eyes. "Thanks for bringing in Freeling. That's all. You can leave the rest to us."

Garry climbed into saddle, swung the gelding around, and rode out of the yard without a backward glance. . . .

Garry was late coming down to breakfast the next morning. But he was glad of the opportunity it gave him to be alone with Claire Benton who was waiting on the late breakfasters. He had finished his bacon and eggs and was drinking a second cup of coffee when Claire passed by.

"Wait, Claire!" he said, grabbing her gently by the arm.

She stopped, and a mocking challenge flickered in her eyes.

"Yes, Ed?" she murmured. "I'll be free for a few hours this afternoon—if that's what you wanted to know."

He shook his head. "The map," he said. "What did yuh do with it?"

Her fine eyebrows drew together. A wary look came to her eyes, then was gone.

"I'm usually bright in the morning," she told him. "But I don't get that." She was smiling now, yet Garry received a distinct impression that she was hiding something behind that smile.

He rose, never taking his steady glance from her face. She kept smiling, but the humor was gone.

"I think yuh do, Claire," he said gently, though he was wondering how he had ever been lured by her physical attractiveness. "Tell Joel I'm comin' after it."

He clapped his Stetson on his head and strode out of the dining room. The lobby was empty but near the doorway he nearly collided with the clerk who was hurrying in.

"There's a notice posted on the bulletin board in front of the jail that ought to interest you!" the clerk called excitedly.

Garry went out to the plank sidewalk, and paused. Men were moving out of doors and striding through the dust toward the jail. A few men came away from the jail, then saw Garry approaching and turned back again, their eyes covertly watching him.

The crowd gave ground grudgingly to let him pass. As always, his presence among these men brought a strained silence, heavily larded with hostility. He came up to the crude, unpainted wooden slab that served as the town's medium of news.

It was impossible to miss the notice which had been posted there in thick black lines on a piece of store wrapping paper:

To Marshal Ed Garry:
If you're lookin' for Eli Cresset, otherwise known as Colt Redwood, come to Shadow Hills.

There was no signature, no indication of who had posted the notice on the bulletin board.

Garry understood that message to be a challenge to him, and the way he would be taken in Tumult. What he did now would make him or break him. Colt Redwood was a wanted man, a killer, and as such Garry meant to get him, to bring him to justice. But now there was still another reason Garry had to recapture Redwood. He must, in order to get at the man or men who were the real power behind the renegade, who were responsible for all the death and terror in and around Tumult.

ALREADY he was calculating his risks—and seeing how slim his chances of success would be. Yet there was only one course open to him. It was a course dictated to him by the deputy U. S. marshal badge he carried, and by his own reckless nature which impelled him never to go around trouble when he could meet it head-on.

A low voice, faintly colored by mockery, spoke behind him.

"Well, what will you do now?"

Garry turned slowly. He saw Janet and Bill Masters sitting their horses at the outer edge of the crowd. It was Janet who had spoken. And though there had been a half-amused note in her voice, her eyes were deadly serious.

"I'm goin' after him, of course," Garry said flatly.

That drew a ripple of excited talk from the crowd. But Garry was not listening. He was watching some odd emotion stir in Janet's mobile, expressive features.

"You're either a fool," she murmured, "or a lot tougher than any of us realize." There was no derision in her tone now. "And somehow," she added, "it's what I'd expect you to do."

Garry took a few strides toward her, stopped beside her stirrup and glanced up at her.

"I wouldn't think of disappointing a lady," he said, a challenging glint in his eyes. "Especially a lovely lady like you."

Dull red slowly spread from Janet's throat to her face. Garry expected a swift flare of anger from her, but instead, her lips moved soundlessly and her gaze lingered upon him with a breathless expression.

Suddenly she caught her lower lip between

her teeth and turned away. Her horse, answering the touch of the reins along its neck, swung around and trotted off down the street.

Ed Garry moved around Bill Masters' gelding and went straight to the livery stable. He hired the same chestnut horse he had ridden the previous day. Throwing on a blanket and saddle, he rode through the archway and on along the road winding out of town.

CHAPTER XII

Mountain Stronghold

HIGH in the Shadow Hills, Garry drew the chestnut to a halt and surveyed the rising pitch in the trail ahead of him. The great saw-toothed crags of the mountains which had been lost in a blue haze earlier that morning now stood out sharp and clear, driving their jagged spikes deep into the brassy vault of the sky.

Behind him lay long, shadowy miles beneath winding aisles of timber, and the broiling stretch of the barrens. It was back in the malpais that the trail of stolen beef had always disappeared. Yet Sheriff Lance and everyone else in Tumult knew that there was only one place rustled cattle could go from here—straight into the higher hills and through the bowl that sheltered Colt Redwood's mountain ranch.

Somewhere ahead lay the answer to the missing beef and, perhaps, to the violent deaths of three men.

A thin curtain of brush concealed Garry now. He was on the point of venturing out into the trail that led upward to a high, rock-walled gorge which, he estimated, was the entrance to Redwood's hideout, when he sighted the telltale glitter of sunlight on gun metal.

It was the sign he had been searching for in that tangle of rocks and brush ahead of him. Before he could reach the bowl he had to get past Redwood's sentry.

Garry considered the problem a moment, the call to immediate action tugging at him strongly. Finally he dismounted, unhooked the lariat from the horn and gave the chestnut a slap on the rump. The startled animal snorted, then trotted out into the clearing.

Garry slid off through the brush alongside the trail, moving slowly and carefully. The chestnut trotted on for twenty or thirty yards, then stopped and lowered its head to graze. At the canyon entrance, there was no sign of movement. If the sentry had spotted the horse, he was staying hidden.

The chestnut moved ahead, still grazing, its reins dragging. Garry kept on through the brush. He was down-wind from the horse, and he was careful not to tread on any twigs or dead branches.

Ten minutes passed, then fifteen. The sentry did not show himself. He was evidently wary of that riderless horse, not sure what the animal's presence signified. Nothing broke the stillness except the occasional harsh call of a cowbird wheeling in flight above the trees. The hot sun continued to beat down on the scorched land and heat waves shimmered in a crazy dance in front of the wide notch of the canyon's entrance.

Suddenly Garry caught the glitter of the sun on the sentry's rifle. Then the man appeared, mounted on a horse. He rode slowly along the trail, lean body bent low in the saddle.

The chestnut stopped grazing, lifted its head and whinnied. The other animal answered. On and on the sentry came. His hand slid back and drew out his six-gun. Garry was fashioning a loop in the rope and drifting toward the edge of the trail.

When the sentry came abreast of the chestnut he leaned half out of saddle to grab the reins. At that moment Garry made his cast. The hissing noose dropped over the sentry's head and shoulders.

He tried to twist around, but Garry heaved hard and pulled him out of saddle. The sentry lost his gun. Then Garry was pounding across the trail. His Colt crashed down upon the sentry's skull before he could cry out. The outlaw went limp.

Working fast, Garry dragged the man into the brush. He cut several lengths of rope, lashed the guard's wrists firmly behind him, then bound his ankles. Then he pulled the renegade's horse off the trail and staked him out a short distance away.

Garry remounted quickly and rode off toward the canyon. He sheathed his six-gun, but his hand remained close to the cedar

butt. The sunlight vanished and Garry moved through a shadowy world between towering rock walls.

He came to the canyon's exit with an abruptness that was startling. One moment he was riding in deep shadow; the next he was back in the sunlight with the rock walls falling gradually away from him and a wide grassy bowl appearing directly ahead.

Garry leaped from saddle, drew the chestnut into the cover of some trees that rimmed the bowl. He went on for a hundred yards, studying the great green stretch of land. Almost in the center of the bowl stood a big log ranchhouse, a barn and a horse corral. A half-dozen saddled horses were tethered to a hitchrack in front of the house.

Far off across the bowl were a couple of hundred head of cattle. Beyond them he noticed a wide break in the bluff which was the only exit from this valley across the divide.

Nobody moved in the yard, but those saddled horses warned that all of Redwood's crew were inside the house.

IT TOOK Garry fifteen minutes to make a half circuit of the bowl and get close enough to the cows to read their brands. Every one that passed by his line of vision wore the Leaning C, which was Cresset's registered brand.

His attention slid back to the house while he considered the problem of getting to Redwood. Suddenly an idea came to him. He climbed into saddle, started around the herd, then suddenly pulled to a halt. A few feet away where the trees and brush grew right against the bluff, he detected a flurry of movement from some hidden source. He had his Colt out of the holster and swinging when a wild-eyed shorthorn bolted into view.

The animal halted its terrified rush, swerved back toward the cliff. There was a sharp crackling of twigs and branches, then the cow vanished into the brush. One moment it was there in front of Garry. The next, it had seemingly run head-on through the granite wall.

Garry neck-reined the gelding toward the bluff, ducking his head to avoid low-hanging tree branches. He came to a narrow opening, pushed through—and found himself in a hidden crevice which widened as he rode.

With mounting excitement he followed the twisting course of the defile. A half-mile farther on the canyon ended and he found himself at the edge of a broad meadow cut off on the south by a rugged mountain stringer.

A yearling cow broke out of a clump of brush ahead of him. Garry spurred the chestunt forward, swinging toward the steer. The animal doubled back on its trail, running hard.

Garry went for his reata, doled out a loop and roped the steer with his first cast. The cow fought the rope, but the chestnut backed up, drawing the rope taut and spilling the animal to the ground. That gave Garry an opportunity to examine the brand.

On the cow's rump was a fresh B in a Box brand. But beneath that brand Garry's keen eyes discerned the faint outlines of an older mark—a Big E.

Here, at last, was the answer to the disappearance of the stolen cattle after they were driven into the Shadow Hills. Looking around, Garry saw other cows grazing in the glade. He released the steer he had roped and rode on to look at the others, and was surprised when he saw that not all the cows carried the B in a Box. A few still carried their original Big E brand.

If he needed any proof that Benton and Cresset were working together in the rustling, this was it. These Herefords had been rebranded skilfully, but there was no denying their origin.

One thing puzzled Garry—the fact that not all the cows had been rebranded. He wondered if some of them were strays from the last rustled bunch. Or—the idea hit him suddenly—was it possible that Benton and Cresset were sharing the Big E cows that were stolen, Benton supplementing his upper ranges with rebranded beef, while Cresset disposed of the others across the divide? It would be a difficult job to change a Big E into Cresset's Leaning C mark.

One thing was certain. The outfit had worked fast to clear the last herd of wet beef through the Shadow Hills. These few cows were left over from the bunch and had been allowed to remain because the outlaws obviously felt certain no one knew about their secret trail out of the bowl.

It was an ideal setup. From almost any section of the bowl that narrow crevice in the bluff was invisible. Even at close range the angle of the opening and the thickly growing brush concealed it.

No doubt every sheriff's posse that ever had come up here had found only Cresset's

branded stuff. And the regular trail across the divide yielded no clues to stolen beef because all of it was pushed through the secret defile into a parallel valley.

Garry turned the chestnut around and rode back through the crevice. Once back in the bowl, he paused to study the log ranchhouse in the distance and the herd of Leaning C cows that separated him from the headquarters buildings.

There were no riders in sight, so he concluded that all of the renegades were inside—possibly waiting for him!

As he thought of that and looked at the dark bulk of the ranchhouse a mile away, he spurred out of the brush and galloped straight toward the nearest cattle. He fired three shots into the air, interspersing them with shrill yells.

The cows stirred uneasily, stopped their grazing, and began moving away. Garry emptied his gun, reloaded and fired again. He rode back and forth, hazing the cattle into a line and driving them forward. Panic spread quickly through the herd. From a slow, shambling run the movement of the cattle soon turned into a frenzied rout.

GARRY was aware of movement around the ranchhouse, of men making a concerted dash for their horses. Then everything was lost in a dun-colored haze of dust that climbed upward to billow in great waves above the stampeding herd.

The thunder of pounding hoofs filled the air as the cattle swept on, heading straight for the ranchhouse. At the last minute their serried ranks split, one half veering left to skirt the corral and barn while the other half swung ponderously around the ranchhouse.

There was no sign of Redwood's crew. Those who had made a dash for their horses no doubt had been swept along with the stampeding cows.

Garry charged across the yard. He ducked low as the gelding hit the screen door and burst into the hall.

A man ran out of a room on Garry's left. The gelding's high-driving forelegs crashed into the outlaw's chest, flinging him against the wall. He fell to his knees, a gun springing into his fist. Garry twisted around, let go with a shot and saw blood spurt from the man's shirt front.

At the end of the hall Garry reined the horse into the front room. Colt Redwood was there, racing toward the hall, muzzle flame spitting redly from the bore of a long-barreled six-gun gripped in his fist.

Garry heard the whine of a slug past his face. He thumbed a shot at the outlaw, saw the big fellow's gun arm go limp. But Redwood rushed on, grabbed the gelding's bridle. Garry clubbed him with his Colt, Redwood slid down along Garry's stirrup, winding up in a limp heap on the floor.

Garry leaped from saddle. He walked into the kitchen, took a bucket of water from the table. Returning to the living room, he threw the water on Redwood and waited for the killer to come to.

Coughing and sputtering, Redwood wiped a shirtsleeve across his bruised face. He glared at the deputy marshal.

"I got yore invitation," Garry told him.

"Cuss yuh," Redwood growled. "Yuh've got the luck of ten men. But it won't last. It won't last." He said it over and over, as if by repetition of a wishful thought he could make it come true.

"On yore feet," Garry ordered. He didn't have much time. As soon as the fleeing cattle had run themselves out Redwood's riders would return. "Yuh're headin' for Tumult and a cell in the jail."

CHAPTER XIII

Unfinished Business

LAMPLIGHT spilling through the open window of Sheriff Lance's frame cottage was like a friendly yellow beacon in the hostile darkness that filled the land. Gray-haired Mrs. Lance had the door open before Garry even dismounted.

"Jeff is in the bedroom," she said, smiling. "Go right in."

"Thanks," Garry murmured, and walked through the comfortably furnished front room.

Lance looked up from a mail order catalog he was looking over, then thrust it aside when he saw who his visitor was. Pleased surprise softened the weather wrinkles in his cheeks.

"I hear yuh got Redwood," he said at once.

"Yeah," said Garry. "He's in jail."

Lance regarded him thoughtfully. "I won't ask how yuh done it. But I know this. Only one of Syl Darwin's men could have pulled it off. Find anything else up there in the Shadow Hills?"

Garry told him about the stolen cattle and the hidden crevice in the far side of the mountain wall that hemmed in Redwood's ranch.

"No wonder we could never get any evidence of rustlin' to clap Redwood behind bars!" exclaimed the sheriff, and went on eagerly: "What about them killin's? Do they tie in with the rustlin'?"

"No proof of it up in the Shadow Hills," Garry replied. "But I figger they *do* tie in."

"Don't forget Joel Benton. Them rebranded cows are evidence enough to move in on him."

"Benton will keep until I've finished with Redwood," said Garry.

"Yuh aim to make Redwood talk?"

"Yeah. The rustlin' setup is clear. But there's still nothin' to say as to who killed Salty and Harley Masters."

The sheriff looked thoughtful a moment. "Well," he said then, "all I got to say is that if yuh want Cresset—or Redwood—to keep, get him out of that jail."

Garry's keen eyes searched the sheriff's face. "Yuh mean yuh don't trust Weed Toler?"

Lance shrugged. "Let's just say I'm not too shore of him. Toler is no hand in a fight, and anybody with a hoss and a rope can pull the bars right out of the adobe in them cell windows." He paused to alter the position of the pillow behind his back, then said flatly, "Like I say, if yuh expect to hold onto Redwood, yuh'll have to sleep in the jail yoreself, or bring him here."

Garry straightened up and squared his shoulders.

"That's out," he said shortly. "I wouldn't risk it."

"Why not? I can still handle a smoke-pole, and nobody would think of lookin' for him here."

"They'd get around to it soon enough. When they did this house wouldn't be safe for you or yore wife."

"Son, don't be proud," the sheriff said complainingly, a stubborn light burning in his eyes, and he went on earnestly, "Yuh haven't got a friend in Tumult—outside of me. Yuh're buckin' a tough game. Yuh need information. Mebbe the two of us can get somethin' out of Redwood."

In the end Lance's impassioned urging won Garry over, though he was still troubled by vague misgivings. Lance handed him a spare ring of keys.

"The smallest key opens the back door to the cell-block. Go in that way and stay off the wagon road when yuh bring Redwood back here."

Garry took the keys, nodded somberly, and walked out. In the saddle once more, he cut straight through a thin patch of timber that eventually brought him to the far end of the alleys of Tumult. He left the chestnut in the yard behind the jail, then went into the barn and saddled one of the sheriff's spare horses.

Bringing the horse into the yard he ground-hobbled it near the chestnut. He took a careful look around to see if he were observed. Once he heard a faint crackling in the brush and waited, but the noise was not repeated so he entered the back door of the jail. It yielded easily to the turn of the key in the lock.

Colt Redwood rose from the hard seat below the cell window when Garry entered. But Garry ignored him for a moment, moving down the narrow passageway to the office door. He opened it silently, saw that the office was empty and concluded that Toler was at supper. Then he returned to the passageway, unlocked Redwood's cell door and gestured him into the corridor with his gun.

"Time to go," he said meagerly.

The big outlaw tramped out, his hands clenched, fighting his urge for a violent outbreak.

"What kind of a booger deal yuh tryin' to pull?" he growled.

"Just takin' yuh to more comfortable quarters," Garry told him.

A LOOK of angry frustration crossed Redwood's coarse features. But there was no compromise in Garry's taciturn manner, or in the steady threat of the cocked six-gun in his fist. Redwood turned on his heel and stalked outside. At the point of his gun Garry ordered him to mount the spare horse, then forced him into the dark of the trees and headed in a roundabout way for the sheriff's house.

There was a sneer on the renegade's face when he was taken into Lance's bedroom.

"Yuh think yuh'll be able to hold me here?" he asked the old lawman.

"I reckon so," Lance said quietly. He lifted his right arm from beneath the clean white sheet that covered him. "And here's my reason for thinkin' so." A well-oiled gun jutted from his fist. "If yuh try to make a break or if any of yore outlaw pards come here, I'll drill you first. Don't forget that."

Redwood sat down in a straight-backed chair without invitation. He smiled derisively. Then he glanced at Garry, hate red and fiery in his eyes. He had not forgotten the beating he had received at the deputy marshal's hands. It rankled within him deeply.

"Go ahead, talk," he growled. "Yuh've got something in yore craw."

Garry thrust his gun back in the holster.

"Who killed Salty and Harley Masters? And Kyle Freeling?"

"I don't know."

"Yuh're lyin'!" snapped Garry. "Benton could be the jigger I want, and he's either yore pardner or yore boss in the rustlin'. I saw enough rebranded cows on the other side of that crevice up in the hills to know."

Redwood looked startled for a moment. He hadn't been prepared for the news that the secret of the defile through the bluff was known. But he regained control of himself at once.

"Yuh're wastin' yore breath," he said flatly. "Yuh'll get nothin' out of me."

Garry watched the renegade closely. Somehow he had an impression that Redwood was not bluffing. And Redwood did not know the meaning of physical fear. So no amount of punishment could break the stiff, unyielding shell of the man.

Garry started toward the door.

"Quittin' on him, Ed?" Lance asked, mild reproof in his voice.

The deputy marshal moved his hands in a vague gesture of impatience.

"I've got no more time to waste on him," he said. "Besides, there are other ways of findin' out what I want to know."

Outside the house, Garry mounted, and rode back to town. Stopping at the livery stable, he relinquished the chestnut to the hostler, paid his bill, then went on to his hotel room.

He undressed quickly, but before hopping into bed, he took the precaution to shove the extra chair under the handle of the door. That done, he sank down on the creaking bed in his underwear. He fell asleep almost immediately. . . .

Near dawn he was awakened by a loud pounding on the door.

"Open up, Garry!" an angry voice commanded.

Garry rolled out of bed.

"Just a minute!" he yelled.

Blinking the sleep out of his eyes, he grabbed his shirt and pants and got into them. He jammed his socked feet into his boots and reached for the gun in the belt hanging on the bed post. The gun was in his hand when he pulled the chair away from the door handle and unlocked the door.

A man's weight thrust the door inward. Garry stepped backward and to one side, his gun barrel lifting to center on the wide, dark target that pushed toward him.

"You're a little late with that smokepole," Doc Vinson growled, as he slapped at the Colt barrel with the palm of his hand. "The man who could have used that is dead."

Garry felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Yuh don't mean that—" he began.

"Yes, Garry," Vinson broke in, "they got

[Turn page]

Can't Keep Grandma In Her Chair

She's as Lively as a Youngster—Now her Backache is better

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

Jeff Lance not more than twenty minutes ago. Shot him twice through the chest. Redwood, or Cresset—whatever you call him—is gone."

Despair mingled with a furious rage filled Garry. And with it came an almost insufferable sense of loss. Slight as had been his acquaintance with the sheriff, he had felt a very real bond of attachment for the man. And now Jeff Lance was gone. And the blame was his. Garry's.

Vinson got a fistful of Garry's shirt in his hand and twisted it.

"You killed him!" Vinson fumed, his words a hoarse shout. "You killed him—just as if you'd held your own gun against him!"

Garry nodded, a dismal regret nagging at him like physical pain.

"Yuh're right," he murmured.

"What made you think you could get away with hiding Redwood in Lance's house?" Vinson persisted angrily. "Don't you know this town is watching every movement you make?"

GARRY shook himself, went to the wash bowl and poured some cold water into it. He doused his face, scrubbed at it with a towel, then came back to the bed. He took down the gun-belt, strapped it around his middle, and thrust the gun back into holster.

"What about Mrs. Lance?" he demanded.

The doctor was slowly getting control of himself. But his voice still held its barbed edge.

"Since Lance was hurt she's been sleeping in the spare room," he said. "She was awakened by gunfire. Lance had Redwood bound to the cot near the wall. When she got to Lance's room he was dying, and Redwood was gone. She heard horses rushing away from the house."

"All right," sighed Garry.

He pushed past the medico, strode rapidly along the hall, hearing Vinson's short, hurried steps following him.

Garry descended the stairs, walked through the lobby with the hostile eyes of a half-dozen townsmen riveted upon him. And he could tell what they were thinking. He was a lawman who had come where he was not wanted, and instead of bringing peace, he had brought more trouble, more death. Now he was responsible for the death of a man who had lived among them for years, a man they had called friend.

The street was as silent as a grave. Garry moved through that hot, dusty stillness and felt all his muscles go tight until sweat ran down his arms and back. When he got a big roan horse at the livery stable, even the hostler had no word for him.

He dreaded what lay ahead of him, yet forced the roan along the road to Lance's cottage. Vinson rode beside him, yet Garry was alone. Alone with a tumult of accusing thoughts that gave him no rest. Alone with the picture of a gray-haired lawman broken by bullets. And of a gray-haired motherly woman broken by grief.

Then he was at the cottage, dismounting before it. The door was opening and Mrs. Lance was there. She seemed to have grown smaller. Her eyes were red from crying, but there were no tears in them now. A faint smile tugged at her lips. Somehow it brought a strange, elusive radiance to her face.

There was no reproach in her glance, no weight of blame for the deputy marshal. Yet that brave smile hurt Ed Garry more deeply than any words of censure could have done.

He was suddenly humble before this woman.

"I wish there was somethin' I could say," he began, and stopped, not certain how he should go on.

She put a hand on his arm. The smile courageously remained on her face. It was like a light steadily shining in the darkness of his remorse.

"Don't blame yourself," she told him. "Jeff wanted to help. He had to have his way." A film of mist slid across her eyes. "The last thing he said to me was, 'Mae, I winged one of 'em. Tell Garry that.'" Her voice dwindled away, then she went on, "Don't you see? He was happy, then. He was fighting for the law—the same law you are fighting for. If he had to die I'm glad it was this way."

"Can I see him?" Garry inquired gently.

The widow held the door open. Garry went in. The doctor followed. Lance lay in his bed, blue-veined hands folded across a clean white sheet. He looked oddly at peace.

Another sheet had been rolled up in a ball and thrust in a corner. There were rust-red stains on it. Lance's life blood.

Garry wheeled from the bed and found Mrs. Lance watching him.

"I reckon I'll be goin', ma'am," he said, and now there was something inflexible in his voice. He gestured to the still form of the sheriff. "Jeff and I have some unfinished

business. It's time I was about it."

The doctor gave Garry a curious, half-puzzled glance. But Mrs. Lance smiled in that same serene way. She said nothing, but her eyes told Garry that she understood. And so he walked out of the house, swung immediately into saddle, and pushed the roan into a fast run up the twisting grade of the road

CHAPTER XIV

Trouble on the East Fork

IT WAS mid-morning when Janet Masters and her cousin, Bill, penetrated the tangle of mesquite and greasewood that hemmed in the sloping meadows of their East Fork land and emerged on the bank of Jordan Creek.

Suddenly Janet gripped Bill's arm and pointed across the flats to the point of lush, green land where Jordan and Alamo Creeks joined.

"Look, Bill!" she exclaimed.

He twisted in the saddle, following the direction of her pointing hand. A short distance away from the weather-worn line shack a small herd of cattle grazed. Bill uttered a low oath.

"Did you tell any of our crew to put some beefs there?" Janet asked tersely.

"No," Bill told her. "They've had orders not to haze any cattle over here unless our other graze peters out."

Janet's eyes flashed. "That can mean only one thing, Bill! Hanald is trying to move in again. Come on!"

The chestnut mare Janet was riding leaped away from the brush at the touch of her spurs. With a clatter of hoofs on dry gravel, Bill sped up beside her. They followed the creek bank until they came to a shallow ford, then crossed over.

When they were still several hundred yards away from the cattle, two men tramped out of the line shack, wheeled toward them and watched their approach. Finally, one of the men ducked back inside. When he emerged he was carrying a rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Be ready for trouble," Janet warned, and adjusted the .38 in her holster. "Watch the man with the rifle."

Bill didn't answer. Then he recognized the rifle carrier.

"It's Leo Hanald shore enough," he said grimly. "If he makes a move with that Winchester I'll drop him before he even begins to swing it into line."

"All right," Janet said. Her cheeks were flaming, showing a fierce excitement that was almost exultation. "You take him! I'll take the other man. But no shooting unless they start it."

They skirted the abandoned well and drew their horses to a halt in front of the cabin. Gray dust plumed up around them. In that smothering cloud another man appeared, rushing around the side of the shack. At a nod from Hanald he ran on until he had put Janet and Bill between the other two Broken Spur men and himself.

Janet frowned, instantly recognizing the significance of that maneuver. Then she leaned forward across the saddle-horn and, with anger banishing all else from her mind, flicked her accusation like a whip in the stocky rancher's stubborn face.

"You were driven off this land before!" she said furiously. "Don't you know when you've had enough?"

"How do you know I've had enough?" Hanald inquired with a mildness that was just a thin veneer covering his own fury, the rifle still held steadily in the crook of his arm.

Janet frowned and squinted her eyes against the sun's glare while she studied the two dozen cows that grazed close to the bank of Alamo Creek. There was no mistaking Hanald's Broken Spur brand on those Herefords.

When her gaze came back to Hanald her voice held a commanding ring.

"You've got until sundown to move those cows out of here!"

For a moment Hanald's face flushed darkly, then he controlled his temper and grinned slowly, maddeningly.

"They're not my cows," he said.

"They're wearing yore brand," Bill cut in gruffly.

"That's nothin'," Hanald drawled. "I just sold 'em to Joe Lowry here." The rancher jerked a thumb at the lean, lank-limbed man beside him. "He drew his time the other day and is set to raise beef critters on his own hook."

Bill's hand was hooked in his belt, and he had to fight down the impulse to slide it toward his gun.

"I don't give a hoot about his raisin' cows," he flung out at Hanald arrogantly, "but he ain't going to do it on East Fork land."

Hanald just smiled again, taking his time before he said:

"That's where yuh're wrong, Bill. Joe here filed on this section early this mornin'."

"He—what?" demanded Bill Masters, worry twisting his features now.

"You heard me," rumbled Hanald. "He filed on this land. It's his, provided he stays here and proves up on it."

"Yuh'll never make it stick," Bill warned.

"I've got nothin' to do with it." Hanald shrugged. "This is Joe's land."

Bill scowled. "Shore it's Joe's till the year is up, then he sells out to you—as arranged—and you own the East Fork."

"Yuh'll never prove that," Hanald pointed out, with a smile.

THEY all swung around at the sound of another rider approaching across the meadow behind the shack. Lowry shifted his position, walking to the cabin wall and flattening himself against the clapboards with his six-gun gripped negligently in his fist.

"All right, Joe," said Hanald, after a moment. "It's that deputy marshal."

Lowry came back to the Broken Spur owner, but his attention never wandered from Garry's high shape in the saddle.

Garry rode up to the group, doffed his hat in greeting to Janet. She nodded briefly, without smiling. Bill Masters just scowled.

"Trouble?" Garry queried.

His keen perceptions had picked up the evidence of strain here, of thinly leashed violence on the part of the Broken Spur riders and Janet and Bill.

Bill started to turn away in truculent silence. Then a thought came to him.

"There's a job here for you," he said to Garry shortly. "I'm wonderin' if yuh can handle it any better'n yuh handled that business at Sheriff Lance's house."

Garry gave Bill a level, hard look. "There's no need to remind me about that. I blame myself entirely. It's a mistake I'll remember for the rest of my life. And I don't aim to leave Tumult till I've squared accounts for Jeff Lance."

"Bill!" Janet said quickly. "What happened to old Jeff?"

"He was shot and killed near dawn today, tryin' to keep Eli Cresset from breakin' out of his house where he had been a prisoner," Bill said, but his eyes were on Garry, not on Janet.

"Cresset a prisoner in Jeff's house?" Janet was incredulous.

"Yeah," Bill said, his voice caustic. "It was this deputy marshal's bright idea that Cresset would be safer there than in the calaboose. But Cresset's friends found him—and now Jeff is dead."

Janet's stricken face turned toward Garry. He felt uncomfortable under the accusation in her stare.

"It's all true," he admitted, "and nobody is sorrier than I am that Jeff is dead. But we can't do him any good talkin' about it."

"You ought to be out hunting his killers," she said coldly.

"I think I know where to find 'em," Garry said tightly. "Right now I'm interested in what's goin' on here."

Bill Masters broke in then.

"I reckon yuh saw them Broken Spur cows out in the meadow, Garry. Well, in case yuh don't realize it, them cows are on Big E range. Now trot out yore little tin badge, shine it up, and give Hanald his walkin' orders."

In Masters' voice was sneering contempt but, aside from giving the Big E rancher a sharp glance, Garry chose to ignore the taunt. His interest was aroused though.

"Got anything to say?" he said to Hanald.

"Yore badge won't help yuh here, Garry," Hanald snapped.

"No? Suppose yuh tell me why."

Hanald pointed to Lowry. "This section of land belongs to this feller—name of Joe Lowry. He filed on it this mornin'. Them cows yuh see belong to him. He just bought 'em from the Broken Spur."

"Are you goin' to set there and let Hanald pull a land steal right under yore nose?" Bill demanded harshly, as he swung his mount around toward Garry.

"If Lowry filed on this section there's nothin' you can do," Garry told him bluntly. "It should be easy to check on it at the land office in town."

"Land office!" Janet broke in tempestuously. "We've been using this East Fork range for years. Nobody's taking it away from us!"

Garry saw the flame of stubborn and unreasoning anger burning in her. No argument right now could convince her that

Hanald had outwitted her. Yet he made his try.

"A lot of ranchers in the West have made the same mistake," he told her. "Neglectin' to file on land because they've been usin' it for years and figgered they owned it by right of usage. Yuh should have filed on this section yoreself if yuh wanted to hold it."

Rage was stretching Janet's nerves wire-thin.

"Ride on!" she commanded imperiously. "We don't need you here. The Big E will handle this in its own way." Her head was high as she turned once more to Hanald. "I'll repeat my warning. You have until sundown to get those cows out of here and Lowry with them!"

GARRY tugged his hat brim lower across his face, leaving it in shadow. But the tightening line of his lips showed that he meant to have the last word.

"A word of warning to you," he said. "If yuh're thinkin' of drivin' Lowry out by force, just remember yuh'll be buckin' the law—U. S. law. And I'm it in Tumult."

"You keep out of this," Janet ordered, then added sharply to Hanald: "What I said still goes!" She tossed her head at Bill. "Come on!" she said.

But Bill didn't hear her. He was watching Garry draw a Winchester from the saddle scabbard beneath his stirrup fender. And the Big E cowman's eyes were riveted on the split butt of that rifle. Something in the stiffening posture of his body made Janet rein in her mare.

"That Winchester!" exclaimed Bill. "Where did yuh get it?"

"Does it look familiar?" Garry inquired, hefting it in his hand while he watched every man in the group with a strict attention.

"Why, you said—" Bill began then stopped. "It was a rifle with a split butt that killed Harley Masters and Kyle Freeling."

He rode forward and reached for the weapon, but Garry gestured him away.

"Where did yuh find it?" Bill demanded.

"I was goin' to ask Hanald here about it," said Garry.

Hanald's jaw bulged angrily. "Why me?"

"Because I found it in yore barn half an hour ago!"

Bill Masters cursed. Janet gasped and the back of her hand moved involuntarily upward to cover her trembling lips. Then suddenly she drew her .38.

"I was right, then, Hanald!" she cried hotly. "You are the sneaking back-shooter."

Her hand whitened around the butt of the gun. Garry saw the glitter in her eyes, and he saw Lowry sneaking his Colt out in a fast draw. Quickly, Garry slashed his hand down against Janet's gun wrist, spilling the .38 from her fingers.

"Hold it!" he snapped to Lowry. "Put that hogleg away."

Janet turned her flushed, angry face toward Garry.

"I might have known you'd be taking sides!" she accused.

"No," Garry replied, "that's not it." He kept his hand near his own gun, not entirely trusting Bill Masters. "I had to keep you from doin' somethin' yuh might regret for the rest of yore life, Miss Janet."

"Do you think I'd feel any remorse for shooting down the man who murdered my father and uncle and segundo?" Janet raged.

"That's just it," Garry insisted. "I'm not shore he's the man we want—because I found this rifle too easy. It was in a place a searcher couldn't miss. Right against the wall of the barn, mixed in with some post-hole diggers and shovels."

Hanald moved nearer to examine the rifle Garry held up for his inspection.

"That's not my rifle," he declared. "Somebody planted it in my barn. And I'd shore like to know who it was."

"This is one more thing the Big E will have to handle by itself," said Bill Masters darkly.

"Why not settle it right now?" suggested Hanald. He moved around until he stood a few feet away from Masters' horse. "Yuh've been honin' for a showdown. This is as good a time as any!"

[*Turn page*]

Don Diego Vega faces danger and death when he takes the trail of three dishonest and ruthlessly brutal traders in ZORRO'S MOMENT OF FEAR, an exciting yarn by JOHNSTON McCULLEY, coming in next month's issue!

CHAPTER XV

Landslide

DEATH'S harsh whisper was suddenly in the still, warm air. Hanald and Bill Masters regarded each other steadily. They were goading themselves toward the blow-off point.

Garry reined his gelding about, sent the animal plunging toward Hanald. He leaned far over in the saddle and hit the rancher alongside the jaw with a looping right-hand punch. The blow knocked Hanald off his feet, but it also shifted Hanald's rage from Masters to Garry—which was what Garry had meant to do.

Hanald rose clumsily, slapping the dust from his levis. He rubbed his chin with a callused palm. His eyes were like hard lumps of coal in a face gone dead-white. He kept his arms rigidly at his sides because Garry had already backed off to point where he could hold the entire group at bay with his cocked six-gun.

"I'll pay yuh back for that," Hanald warned.

"Mebbe yuh'll thank me some day, for savin' yore skin," Garry told him. He looked at the others. "If there's anybody in Tumult who wants Salty and Harley Masters' killer, it's me. It's my job to find that man. And I'll find him or be carried out of Tumult on my back." He paused a moment before adding: "This rifle might be an important clue. If I can find the owner."

"And how are you going to do that?" Janet cut in. "Ask every cowman in town if he owns it? Do you think anyone would admit that it belonged to him?"

"There's another way of findin' out," Garry murmured. "And I think I know where to go to do it, too."

"And by the time you do find out," Janet said, "a few more may be dead in Tumult."

"That's right," Garry said coolly, in the uneasy quiet. "And if the killer follows the pattern of his other crimes you and Bill may be the next victims."

The grim warning made no impression on Janet. She remained angry and hostile. Derision twisted Bill's sullen mouth.

"We know all about that," he said. "In fact, the bushwhacker tried his luck last night as I was ridin' back to the ranch from town."

He removed his dusty sombrero and extended it to Garry. The deputy marshal saw the round, twin holes in the crown, and took the hat to examine it more closely.

"Yuh're lucky yuh're still here to talk about it," Garry said thoughtfully. "Them shots must have come mighty close to drillin' right through yore head. If yuh don't mind, I'll keep this for evidence."

Bill didn't answer. He glared at Hanald, and his face tightened as he looked out across the meadow at the grazing cattle. At last, he turned his horse around.

"Let's ride," he said to Janet.

Garry lifted the gelding's reins and said with gentle purpose:

"I'll go along with yuh."

Janet started to frame a protest. But some expression in the deputy marshal's face stopped her.

They were two miles along the trail leading to the Big E and Bill had drifted slightly ahead of the others when Garry rode up beside Janet, grabbed her mare's reins and drew the animal to a halt.

Janet fought to recapture the reins, calling on Bill for aid. Bill stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"Yuh can go the rest of the way alone, Bill," Garry told him.

Garry's Colt was in his fist, and his attention was equally divided between Janet and Bill who had whirled his mount about and was coming back.

"Turn around and ride on," Garry ordered.

Bill halted, and his thin face was as black as a thunder cloud.

"What's yore game now?" he demanded angrily.

"I'm takin' Janet back to town with me," Garry said calmly.

"What for?" snapped Bill.

"My reasons should be clear enough," Garry said, giving Bill a searching stare. "Three men on the Big E have died. Somebody tried to kill you last night. That broken cinch on Janet's saddle was likely an attempt on her life." Garry's voice rose, vibrant with concern. "The pattern is clear enough. The Big E is marked for destruction. The killer can't stop now—and it's my guess that the next time he'll try for Miss Janet because she owns the ranch. In other words, Bill, I don't believe the Big E is safe for yore cousin.

She's goin' to town with me, and she'll stay there till I've tallied the killer."

"I'm not going!" Janet fumed. "My place is on the Big E if trouble breaks. I'm not worried about myself."

"Then it's time yuh began to worry," Garry told her. He looked at Bill. "Take yore gun out of holster and drop it to the ground."

BILL cursed Garry savagely. But he lifted his Peacemaker out of the scabbard and let it fall to the ground.

Garry gave Janet a slanting glance. "I hope yuh'll go peaceable. If yuh don't, I'll have to force yuh."

"I have no doubt you can be rough," Janet said witheringly. "I've seen you in action."

"All I'm thinkin' of is protectin' yuh," Garry said.

"Where are yuh takin' her?" Bill demanded. He seemed to have accepted the situation.

"It'll be better for both of yuh if yuh don't know that," Garry told him tersely.

Bill's anger flared up again. "By Tophet, yuh're carryin' this a little too far to suit me."

"That's the way it has to be," Garry insisted. "I reckon it does seem high-handed to you. But this is a deadly game we're in—with everybody playin' for keeps. It's time for me to make the next move. First, however, I aim to see that Miss Janet is safe."

"You're talking as if you don't even trust Bill," Janet said resentfully, and her eyes were like chilled flakes of gray metal.

"I don't trust anybody," Garry said flatly. "The fewer people who knew where yuh are, the safer yuh'll be. If I should tell Bill here, he might mention it to one of yore crew. And who knows what might happen after that?"

"Our crew is loyal!" Janet cried with sudden vehemence.

"Did yuh forget Kyle Freeling?" Garry asked.

Janet bit her lip, and the shadow of haunting memories darkened her eyes for a moment.

Garry waved his gun toward the narrow trail that twisted through the trees.

"Head for home, Bill."

Bill glowered, turned his horse around, then stopped to deliver one final threat.

"All right, I'll go. But if anything happens to Janet I'll be comin' after yuh!"

Garry stared back at him with disconcerting steadiness.

"I'll do the worryin' about Miss Janet," he said. "You look out for yoreself."

There was a faintly baffled expression on Bill's face as he tried to read some hidden meaning in Garry's words. Then his jaw clamped, he swung his horse around and rode away through the timber.

"You're sure you know what you're doing?" Janet asked after Bill's horse had carried him out of sight.

Garry regarded her levelly, showing no sign of the deep feeling that she aroused in him.

"I think I do," he said.

She was no longer hostile. But neither was she friendly. She had assumed an attitude of indifference, as if whatever he might do or plan was of no importance to her.

"Shall we ride?" she asked idly.

Garry nodded, waited for her to swing her mare around in the trail, then followed beside her at a fast trot.

During the next quarter-hour he made several attempts to talk to her. Each time he was stopped by the laconic coolness and abruptness of her replies. At last, he gave it up and they rode in silence through the day's gathering heat.

On all sides the country rolled away from them in undulating waves of curling, sun-cured grass, broken at irregular intervals by the sudden sharp thrust of a brush or tree-covered ridge. Cowbirds wheeled in swirling flight from a grove of alders and swooped swiftly by overhead. Far off they heard the baying of some ranch hound.

Although Garry had abandoned his efforts to talk to Janet, he was unable to keep his eyes away from the girl. Despite her strong personality, she was so completely feminine. The soft curves of her rounded body, the proud way she sat in the saddle, the cool, fresh lines of her tanned profile, and her red lips were so alluring that there was no room in his mind for anything else.

Before them the land heaved upward in a towering bluff as the grassland fell away. The trail cut around the base of the cliff and followed a wide ledge. Beyond the ledge the ground dropped away in a short, shaly slope to a shallow culvert that carried off rainwater, eventually depositing it in a sandy wash a hundred yards away.

The trail dipped downward in a gentle grade, then swung with the line of the cliff. Garry looked up along the slanting sides of the bluff, noting the thin screen of brush and stunted trees that grew along the top.

As he and Janet rode out along the ledge, there was a sudden clatter off to their right. A few loose rocks skidded down the cliff side and bounded across the trail.

Jerking his head around, Garry saw a great cloud of dust moving down the shaly slope. And he knew that, hidden behind that gray-brown curtain, tons of rocks and dirt were rushing downward in a deadly landslide!

Janet had trotted slightly ahead of Garry as the trail narrowed. Garry spurred forward, coming alongside Janet as the noise of pounding rocks became louder. Two or three boulders bounded across the trail. One struck the mare. The animal stumbled, started to go down.

Grasping Janet in his arms, Garry hauled her free of the stirrups. Then he neck-reined the roan to the left, tried to ride clear of that mass of rocks and dirt that swept down upon them. The roan, buck-jumping back along the trail, was dragged to the rim of the ledge.

Garry let himself roll out of saddle as the roan galloped on. He hit the lower slope on his shoulders, the breath jolted out of him, but somehow he held on to Janet. Then they were rolling over and over, arms locked about one another, toward the shallow culvert while the booming roar of falling rocks filled the air.

On one of those rapid revolutions Garry felt his face pressed into the ground. Dirt and pebbles gouged him. Then something hard and ragged-edged hit him between the shoulder blades and bounded off. Another rock struck his arm. Then they landed in the ditch with a bone-wracking jolt.

The force of their tumble dragged all the wind out of both of them. They lay helpless as wave after wave of rocks pelted into the culvert. Garry pulled Janet close against the overhanging dirt wall of the ditch. They huddled there, fighting for air in the thick pall of dust, while the shale piled up behind them.

At last, the landslide stopped. The silence that followed was ghastly and unreal.

Garry shook himself. He felt bruised and beaten. He released his firm hold upon Janet and got to his feet, reeling in the deep shale. Janet took his hand and allowed him to pull her up.

Her face was smudged. Two scratches made livid streaks across her left cheek. She found it difficult to stand, and Garry placed a hand under her elbow to steady her. When, at last, she stared at him, her eyes were wide pools of shock.

"Yuh all right?" he asked, unsteadily.

"I—I think so," she said, trembling.

When she lifted her face to his a smile trembled on her lips. It was a smile free of all antagonism. Suddenly the fear that had held Garry rigid, the fear that Janet had been injured, melted away, leaving in its place another emotion, stronger and more compelling.

He caught her swaying figure in his arms, held her close. His lips sought hers, and stayed there.

The tumult inside him was deep and real. And he recognized it. It was nothing like the passing fancy that Claire Benton had been—gone in a fleeting moment.

This was real! This was living! This was Janet—the girl he had always been waiting for!

CHAPTER XVI

The B in a Box

AFTER a long interval Janet drew her lips away from Garry's. She looked up at him, her eyes warm and tender.

"That was—wonderful!" Garry said huskily.

He watched the color creep into her face in a rosy glory. She hid her face against his broad chest.

"I've tried to keep from loving you," she whispered. "Maybe because you seemed so sure of yourself. Maybe because you refused to ally yourself with anyone in Tumult. I only know that you've been constantly in my mind."

Garry smiled at her. And that smile erased all hardness from his face. Even his smoky gray eyes lost their eternal wariness. Suddenly she reached for his face with her hands and brought his lips down to hers once more.

When she pushed him gently away, Garry looked toward the ledge trail above them and his features grew somber.

"Time to get out of here," he said.

Janet stared at the piled mass of rubble and shuddered at the thought of the smothering oblivion she had so narrowly missed.

"That's always been a bad spot in the

trail," she said. "After every storm there's a landslide."

Garry took her arm and guided her as they climbed through knee-deep shale.

"This time there was no storm," he said soberly.

"You mean—" Janet gave him a quick, startled glance.

"I mean this was no accident," he said. "Somebody is still tryin' to kill yuh. They come close this time. That's why yuh must take no more chances." He paused, and a deep frown furrowed his brow. "There's somethin' else, too. Yuh've heard about my trip to the Shadow Hills. Yuh also know about Jeff Lance. What yuh don't know, what I haven't told anybody except the sheriff—because I didn't want to start a bloody range war—is that I found some Big E beef up in the hills."

"You're sure of that?"

"I saw 'em plain enough. Most of the critters had had their Big E brands doctored and were carryin' the B in a Box mark."

"Joel Benton!" Janet gasped. "You think he's the one who's been—"

"Yes," Garry said, "he's been bossin' the rustlers, as far as I can see, with Cresset to do the rough work."

"But how did you manage to find our stolen cattle when none of the posses ever could?" asked Janet.

"Just luck, I reckon." But he told her about the hidden pass.

Janet drew to a halt, her hands knotting into small fists.

"I've got to go back to Bill," she said. "We'll round up the crew and clean out the Shadow Hills!"

"That's just what I don't want yuh to do," Garry said firmly. "If it comes to a showdown scrap there'll be a lot of good men needlessly killed."

"But you can't expect me to let Cresset and Benton get away with all the Big E beef they've stolen!" protested Janet.

"The cows will keep for a few days, Janet," Garry assured her. "We're after bigger game than rustlers. We're huntin' the man who killed yore father and yore uncle. The man who has already tried to kill you. Mebbe he's one of the rustlers. I'm counting on that Winchester I found at Hanald's ranch to trap him."

"How will the rifle help you?" Janet was puzzled.

"It's a special issue rifle—I'm pretty shore of that. The barrel is longer than the regular thirty-thirty, the rifle is lighter, and the workmanship finer and more elaborate. There's a small number burned into the butt which makes me think each rifle in the series may have been numbered and registered in the name of the purchaser. I'll send a wire to the Winchester company when I get back to town. Meanwhile, keep what I've told yuh about the rustled cattle to yoreself. Don't tell Bill. Don't try to see him."

"All right," Janet promised. "But it isn't easy to sit back and wait."

They had reached the ledge now. Boulders and rocks studded the trail. There was no sign of Janet's mare. But about thirty yards away the roan was grazing in the brush.

GARRY studied the rim of the cliff.

"Any trail up there?" he asked Janet, and she nodded.

"Yes, but it's not more than a narrow track between thick brush. It swings back to the wagon road that runs between Benton's spread, our place and town."

"Mebbe I'll have a look at it later on," Garry said, "though if it's only a rough track the chances are that the ambusher left no sign. Best thing to do, I reckon, is to ride on to Mrs. Lance."

"Is that where you're taking me?"

"It's the only place I know," Garry said.

They were approaching the roan gelding when the whinny of another horse drew their attention back along the ledge. Janet's mare came trotting lamely toward them. Garry had not seen the mare after the mount fell during the first onslaught of the landslide, for he had been completely occupied with protecting Janet. But somehow the mare had managed to survive. She was limping, though, so Garry decided the roan would have to carry double and they would lead the mare.

They reached the Lance cottage twenty-five minutes later, but waited in the brush until several visitors, who had come to pay their respects to the dead sheriff, had gone off to town. When Mrs. Lance did meet them at the back door, she looked more worn, more tired than when Garry had last seen her. Grief was sapping her strength, and her eyelids were heavy from recent crying. Still, she managed to greet them with a smile.

As rapidly as possible Garry told her why he believed someone was trying to kill Janet and spoke briefly of their miraculous escape

from death in the landslide.

"This is the only place I could think of to bring Janet," he said. "She'll be safe here—if we can keep the town from findin' out about it."

The gray-haired widow gathered Janet in her arms.

"I'm happy to have her," she assured Garry. She kissed Janet warmly. "My dear, you, too, have had your share of sorrow," she said. "If I can help you in any way, I want to do it."

"Yuh understand I want her to stay hid when visitors come to see—Jeff?" Garry said.

"There's the root cellar," Mrs. Lance replied. "Nobody goes down there."

"All right, and thanks," he said. He turned uncertainly to Janet. "I'll be going, then."

He held out his hand to her, but she rushed into his arms.

"Come back to me, Ed!" she whispered as she kissed him.

He kissed her, and move toward the door. There he halted.

"Remember," he said, "I don't want yuh to get in touch with anybody while yuh're here. Not even Bill."

Janet hesitated, then said, "All right, Ed."

He left then, and a moment later the two women heard his horse trotting down the road. . . .

Garry stopped in Tumult just long enough to send a wire to the Winchester Arms Company, giving the serial number of the rifle he had found in Hanald's barn and requesting the name of the purchaser. Then he headed for the hills again.

The roan was tired and he realized he should have hired a fresh mount, but he did not want to waste any more time. He had a feeling that the deadly game was moving to a climax and he wanted to be ready. Yet he was still handicapped by a lack of vital information.

The killer was unknown, and whoever he was, he was the crux of all the deviltry that had been going on. True, Garry had found the Winchester at the Broken Spur. But the weapon obviously had been planted there for him to find.

There remained only two places to search for clues—Benton's B in a Box ranch, and the Big E. Yes, even the Big E, for Kyle Freeling, Janet's *segundo*, had been riding with the rustlers. There might be more than one disloyal hand on the Masters' payroll.

He decided to visit the B in a Box outfit first because Benton had shown such interest in the reason for Harley Masters' arrival in Tumult. And because Benton undoubtedly had that stolen railroad map.

IT WAS late afternoon when Garry left his horse ground-tied in the timber close to the B in a Box ranch yard. Shadows were banking steeply down the slopes of the hills. A bright shaft of golden light still bathed the upper third of the sixty-foot granite bluff which towered majestically behind the scatter of buildings, but the yard itself was shadowy with the dull gray of approaching dusk.

There was a clatter of pots and pans coming from the cook shack, where the cook was getting supper. Behind the barn only a few horses stirred up the loose dust in the corral. The B in a Box crew had not yet ridden in from the range. The only man Garry could actually see was a lanky puncher sitting cross-legged on a bench outside the bunkhouse, repairing an old saddle.

Garry slid through the trees until he had put the ranchhouse between the puncher and himself. The cook shack was on the side of the house facing the busy puncher. Only one grimy-paned kitchen window faced Garry.

He had to count on the cook being too busy to pay attention to what was going on in the yard. So, leaving the timber, he raced lightly across the dust. He reached the front wall of the house, flattened against it a moment, his gun leaping into his hand while he studied the trees he had just left. Nothing moved there, nor in the yard.

Impatience drove Garry rashly forward. He reached the veranda, vaulted the rail and moved swiftly to the front door. He kicked it open and rushed inside, the hammer of his gun drawn back to full cock.

The precaution was unnecessary. The wide front room was empty. As soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, he was able to discern the rough details of the room—the wrinkled bear rug in the center of the floor, the huge fireplace, the old sofa, the three straight-backed chairs and the scarred table littered with old newspapers and a torn mail order catalog.

There was no desk in the room. That meant Benton kept his records upstairs. Garry left the living room and mounted the stairs to a shadowy hall on the second floor.

The first room he came to was unfurnished. It obviously was used as a catch-all or storeroom. A pair of saddles, several unmatched spurs, some boots and rolled-up levis littered the floor.

Garry pounced upon the boots. He examined them closely, but none of them was minus a heel.

The next room was generous in size with two windows facing west, where the land fell steeply away from the side of the house. There was an iron bed, two chairs, a battered bureau on one side of the room. The other half functioned as a makeshift office.

A roll-top desk stood catty-corner between two walls. Beyond it was a rough-hewn writing table and an extra chair. A few feet to the left of the table was a small black safe.

Garry's eyes lighted as he saw it.

His interest was interrupted by the sound of a horse outside. Crouching with gun in hand, Garry slipped to the window sill and waited tensely. The animal was coming around the ranchhouse from the back. Soon the horse appeared, without rider or saddle, a stray cayuse shifting for itself.

[Turn page]

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CHAPTER XVII

Renegade's Rout

JUST because the safe looked strong and durable, Garry decided to tackle the desk first. He tried to roll back the top, but it was locked. Drawing out a knife and replacing his gun in holster, he pried away at the lock.

After ten minutes of toil he succeeded in springing the lock and rolled the top back. There was the usual array of pigeonholes, each stuffed with papers. Garry riffled through them rapidly, but took care to replace them as he found them. Most of the papers were receipted feed bills, records of cattle sales, or old roundup figures.

Finally, in one of the bottom compartments, among some yellowed newspaper clippings, he found the railroad map which Claire had stolen. He was about to pass over the clippings, but thoroughness prompted him to unfold one of them. And he was immediately glad he had.

The clipping proved to be an account of a stage holdup near Boise, Idaho. The driver and shotgun guard had been killed, but the guard had lived long enough to identify one of the outlaws as Colt Redwood.

Garry's blood began to race. For instinctively he knew what was to follow. Reading on, he noted that the indignant newspaper man who had written the story had drawn the obvious conclusion that Redwood's companion had been the notorious renegade, Jed Northey.

For months Northey and Redwood had been terrorizing Idaho and neighboring states with daring raids on stage-coaches. There followed a detailed description of Redwood and a somewhat vague outline of Northey's appearance.

Intent on breaking up the rustling combine in Tumult, for the moment, Garry had almost forgotten that Syl Darwin had instructed him to find Colt Redwood and Jed Northey and bring them back to Hobart. He had found Redwood posing as Eli Cresset, a hill rancher. And now he had found Jed Northey!

As he refolded the clipping and thrust it in his pocket, a hard, brittle voice said from the hall door:

"Find everything yuh wanted, Garry?"

It was Joel Benton. Garry turned slowly, keeping his hand away from his gun. Benton stood near the door, his thumbs hooked in his belt. Portly, slack-jawed Weed Toler was there, too, and he moved quickly into the room, sliding along the wall. He didn't draw his gun, but he kept one hand poised like a hooked claw above his holster.

A third man was a puncher Garry had never seen. But the fellow had the lean, hawklike look of a gun-hand and he moved in a half-crouch to the window, completing the maneuver to trap Garry in a withering cross-fire in the event there was any gunplay.

"Did yuh find what yuh wanted?" Benton repeated, a sharper edge now in his voice.

"More than I expected," Garry said coolly.

Benton's face seemed to have grown long and gaunt. He let the silence continue until it became a steady vibration in the air. Then Garry broke it.

"Benton, yuh've got some Indian in yuh," he said.

"Yore hoss wandered out of the brush," the rancher answered. "Since yuh wasn't in the saddle it was easy to figger yuh was in the house. I reckon yuh found that railroad map in the desk."

"Yeah. I figgered yuh had it, but this was the first chance I had to come after it."

"I'll take that map back—now!" Benton said sharply.

"What makes yuh think yuh will?" Garry countered.

The room grew so hushed that a brooding menace seemed to quiver in the fading gray light that filtered in through the windows.

Benton gestured toward Toler and the puncher, then tapped the butt of his own gun.

"Are they reason enough?"

"Not for me." Garry's voice was flat and harsh. He could see Benton's temper flare, but before the rancher could sputter his anger, Garry struck again, fast and hard. "There was somethin' else in yore desk that interested me more'n the map did. An old newspaper clipping about a stage-coach holdup. The renegades who looted that mail stage and killed the driver and guard were named Redwood and Northey. One of my reasons for coming to Tumult was to get

those men. Redwood, of course, is Eli Cresset. And you, Benton, are Jed Northey!"

Surprise twisted Benton's face. Weed Toler's flabby jowls moved spasmodically and he regarded Benton with a sudden, avid interest.

Benton glared at Toler while he fought for self control, and when at last he did speak a heavy note of mockery was in his voice.

"I wouldn't want to bet on yore chances of provin' I'm Northey."

"A little investigatin' in the right places will get me all the proof I need," Garry told him coldly.

Benton smiled—a travesty of a smile. "But yuh've got too little time left for that," he said evenly.

GARRY knew as well as if the threat had been made in plain words that it could not more clearly have told that imminent death faced him. And, suddenly cold and detached, he was savagely willing that these men should try to do their worst. For he would be right there to challenge their gun supremacy when violence broke loose in that room.

"I'll have time enough to find out what you know about the deaths of Salty and Harley Masters and Kyle Freeling," he said, watching each man keenly.

"Yuh've got the wrong man, Garry," Benton said impatiently, his voice a rough gust of sound.

Benton slid a sharp glance toward Toler, and Garry realized that time was up. He lurched backward, digging for his gun. And all the while he was conscious that the threat of death hovered over him and the other three grim-faced men like a gray, miasmic fog.

Jumping back toward the wall, Garry swept up his Colt in a blinding blur of speed and fired a snap shot at Benton. The bullet ripped through Benton's wrist, breaking it. Slowly he doubled up in agony, then dropped to his knees out of the line of fire.

Garry's second shot went high past Weed Toler's shoulder before the deputy marshal turned and dived for the open door leading to the storeroom at his back. Toler's gun roared once, twice. Lead splintered the doorjamb close to Garry's face. The puncher was shooting now, too.

Garry whirled with his hand on the doorknob and pumped two more shots at Toler. Again he missed. He saw the flame of Toler's answering fire at the same moment that something stinging and hot burned his side. Then he had the door slammed shut and bolted.

He stumbled across the room to the door that opened on to the hall and locked it. It would withstand assault from that direction for a time, at least. He was aware of a sharp, smarting sensation punishing his side. He felt the blood seep warmly out of the bullet gash and soak his shirt.

A gun roared from the hall through a door panel, and bullets fanned across the room, driving Garry toward the communicating wall between the two rooms. Shoulders propped against the wall, he broke open his Colt and jacked out the spent shells. He pulled fresh cartridges from his belt and shoved them past the loading gate. Only then did he notice that the firing from the adjoining room had stopped. But someone was still pouring lead through the hall door panels.

"Knock that door down, Toler, or shoot out the lock!" Benton's rasping voice boomed out suddenly.

In a moment or so a heavy weight shook the door. One of the panels slit vertically and bits of plaster showered down from wall and ceiling.

Garry moved forward, lifted his gun and sent two shots crashing through the door. He heard Toler yell in pain. Then he swerved to the open window and looked out.

A feeling of dismay hit him. The ground on this side fell, sheer and sharp, away from the house, ending in a deep, rocky culvert. If he jumped he risked breaking a leg or smashing himself up completely. Yet if he remained in this room, he was also doomed. In moments they would batter down one of the doors and riddle him with lead.

There was only one chance left, and he had to take it. Holstering his Colt, he climbed through the window. He let his weight drop until he was hanging by his hands from the sill.

A few feet to his left was another window—the first of two windows in Benton's bedroom. Toler was in there now and probably Benton was also. Garry had to stake everything on the chance that they would be too occupied with smashing down the communicating door to watch the window. Once inside the room and behind them he would have a chance.

He slid his hands along the narrow sill to

the edge. Then, hanging by his right hand, he groped with his left for the sill of the other window. It was a long reach.

The strain was tremendous. He felt as if some force was striving to tear his muscles out by the roots. His body was a dead weight pulling at his fingers. Sweat came out on his forehead, ran down his face. It put a salty taste in his mouth. And all the while that hammering inside and the stinging pain in his ribs grew more unbearable.

Somehow he contrived to slide an inch or two farther to the left. His grip on the sill was looser now. His fingers were sliding. Then he felt his left hand grate on a flat wooden surface.

Quickly he transferred his weight to that hand, let go with his right and swung himself over. The hard, straining pull on his muscles nearly tore his left arm out of its socket. But he held on, finally securing a purchase for his right hand, also.

HE RESTED there, hanging in space, drawing great breaths of air into his laboring lungs. Then he pulled himself up above the sill. He had a glimpse of Toler flinging himself against the door which was just about ready to collapse, and of Benton, a bandanna wrapped around his shattered wrist, behind Toler. Benton was holding his gun awkwardly in his left hand.

Two more punchers charged into the room and Garry's heart sank. They must have ridden up during the night and been attracted by the commotion. They joined Toler at the door.

The three men, launching their combined weight against the splintered panels, smashed it down. The force of their charge knocked them off their feet. They fell sprawling in a tangled heap of wreckage.

At that moment Garry heaved himself upward and through the open window. He scrambled to his feet, lurched across the room with his gun swinging upward.

Benton wheeled around, gave a grunt of angry surprise. The gun in his left hand spat flame. The bullet sped past Garry and on into the darkened hallway. Garry's thumb flipped his Colt hammer on a shot, but Benton dived out of range.

Toler reared up out of the debris in the room beyond, a gun in his fist, his face a mask of hate. But before he could fire Garry's second shot ripped into him. He collapsed against the legs of one of the ranchies behind him.

Out in the hall Garry laced the darkness with two more shots. A puncher replied with a wild volley, but by that time Garry was bolting down the stairs.

He heard the thump of boots along the upstairs hall, the strident clamor of Benton's voice directing the pursuit. Then he had reached the front door, jerked it open and was speeding across the veranda.

There were six horses at the hitch-rack, including his roan. Every second was of tremendous importance, but he lingered long enough to cut the ropes of the other horses before he climbed into the saddle of the roan.

A tumult reached him from the house. Boots pounded in the front hall, racing toward the door. Garry twisted in the kak and pumped a brace of shots into the hall. He purposely aimed high. The two punchers who had tried to crowd through the doorway at the same time suddenly dropped back out of sight.

Garry spurred the roan into the midst of the other animals, swinging at their rumps with the end of a rope. They scattered toward the nearby timber, and the roan ran with them.

Six-guns sang a wicked song behind Garry as Joel Benton and the two B in a Box punchers sprinted through the dust, trying to bring him down. But in a moment the brush closed heavily around him and he gave the roan its head.

The other horses continued their flight for a half-mile or more, then gradually slowed their pace to wander off into the bushes in search of grass shoots.

CHAPTER XVIII

Challenge to an Outlaw

KNOWING that Ed Garry had been the victor when he had so unceremoniously ridden away with Janet, Bill Masters was in a black, bitter mood when he reached the Big E Ranch. It was well past the noon hour and the two punchers he had left at the spread to repair one of the buckboards had already eaten. And so he had to sit down to a warmed-

up meal of beef stew, biscuits and black coffee, and eat alone.

Afterward, he wandered around the ranch yard. He kept thinking of Garry and the more he thought about the deputy marshal the more infuriated he became. Twice he started toward the corral to saddle a horse and ride into town to try to find where Garry had taken Janet.

He was so taut, so nervous that the two punchers noticed it. When Bill caught them talking in low tones while they covertly watched him, he abruptly ordered one man to ride over to the north meadow to help the rest of the crew round up strays.

When the puncher had vanished toward the hills in a cloud of dust, Bill started toward the corral. Halfway there he hauled around at the sound of hoofbeats coming along the trail from town.

A riderless horse was approaching. Stirrups flappings and reins trailing, the animal switched from a trot to a gallop as the ranch buildings came into view and it caught the scent of feed and water.

The puncher working at the buckboard dropped his tools to intercept the horse.

"That's Janet's mare!" Bill exclaimed.

"Good glory, do you think the mare threw her?" the puncher asked. He ran an exploring hand along the mare's sweat-streaked sides. Then he whirled. "Look, Bill!" he cried excitedly. "There's a hunk of paper pinned to the saddle skirt."

Bill ripped the folded square of notepaper from the saddle skirt where it had been fastened with a heavy tack and read the message it contained:

Bill:

I've changed my mind about Ed Garry. He's all right. In fact, I think he's—well—a straight shooter and pretty nice. He swore me to secrecy, but I had to let you know where I am in case anything important comes up.

You'll find me at Mrs. Lance's place. The poor woman is broken up about old Jeff's death, though she tries not to show it. She needs help, so don't count on seeing me for a few days.

Meanwhile, here is some news that should surprise you. Garry told me that he found a lot of our beefs in a hidden valley up in the Shadow Hills. Most of the critters had had their brands blotted and were wearing Joel Benton's brand on their hides.

So you know who to go after now—Cresset and Benton. But don't do anything unless you hear from me. Garry wants us to hold up on the rustling end of the trouble until he's found Dad's killer. He expects to have the proof he needs within the next twenty-four hours.

Janet

A dark scowl furrowed Bill's forehead as he finished reading the note. Then he crushed it into a ball and shoved it into the pocket of his shirt. Seconds dragged by and his expression grew more and more enigmatic.

"What does it say?" queried the puncher a little uneasily. He didn't want Bill to accuse him of prying.

"It's from Janet," Bill answered readily enough. He explained how Garry had taken Janet into town. "The marshal didn't want anyone to know where Janet is, but she had a trick or two up her sleeve. This note says she's stayin' with Jeff Lance's widow."

"Want me to fetch her?" the puncher asked.

"No. I reckon Mrs. Lance needs her help now."

Although he spoke clearly enough, there was a speculative gleam in Bill's eyes that showed he was thinking of other things.

Finally, he wheeled and hurried over to the corral. He roped a big bay out of the cavvy of horses, got a blanket and saddle from the barn, threw them on the bay and cinched up. He climbed into the hull and trotted over to the puncher who had gone back to his work on the buckboard.

"Stick around, Jess," Bill told him, then turned away and galloped out of the yard. . . .

Half an hour before sundown Bill Masters reached the brush-ringed ridge from which Garry had first viewed the rocky gorge which led to Eli Cresset's mountain ranch. He paused only briefly to let the bay blow and to study the canyon entrance until he had picked out the sentry's position among the trees and rocks below him. Then he ventured boldly out and rode down the grade.

He saw a stir in the brush, heard the harsh rasp of a rifle hammer being cocked.

"It's Bill Masters!" he called out. "Put up yore gun."

FOR a moment there was no movement in the brush. Then the green branches began to sway and a horse and rider pushed forward to block the narrow trail.

Bill Masters trotted on. He kept his hands well away from his cartridge belt. When he was within fifty yards of the sentry, the man let the barrel of his Winchester tilt downward.

"All right, Masters," he said grumpily. "Yuh got a reason for comin' up here?"

"Shore," Masters snapped. "But it'll keep

till I see Cresset."

"Suit yoreself," said the guard, as he let Masters drift past him in the trail.

He followed Masters into the gorge.

"What's the idea?" Masters demanded. "I don't need escort."

"Cresset's orders," the guard said shortly. "Things have changed since that cussed marshal come to Tumult. I'll ride along—behind yuh."

The two riders came out into the bowl a few minutes later. Sunlight still bathed the high peaks, but in the hollow the light was fading fast. Far off across the glade cattle grazed. A plume of smoke rose from the chimney of the log ranchhouse, then hung motionless in the still, twilight air.

A puncher came around the side of the house from the corral, spotted the two riders and quickly ducked through the back door. By the time Masters and the guard reached the crude log veranda Cresset and two other hands were waiting at the top of the steps.

"What do yuh want, Masters?" Cresset demanded.

Masters ignored the gruffness in the big man's tone. He didn't say anything as he let his half-insolent gaze rest on Cresset's still bruised and swollen face.

"If yuh've got anything to say, say it or get out," Cresset said, his eyes suddenly hooded and dangerous.

"Shore I've got somethin' to say," Masters told him. "But I'd like it to be inside the house and just between the two of us."

Cresset glared at the young rancher, yet something conspiratorial in Master's manner won him over. He motioned for Masters to get down and to come inside. As Masters moved up the steps and went past him, Cresset snapped a gruff order to the other men.

"Clear out till I call yuh."

They trooped down the steps and wandered idly across the yard.

Inside the sparsely furnished front room, Cresset lit a smoky lamp, then turned to face Masters.

"Let's have it."

Masters made a fist of one hand and looked at the hard white knuckles carefully.

"Yuh're gettin' kind of high and mighty for a renegade and cattle stealer," he drawled.

Cresset swore, started toward Masters, then halted. His eyes were like smooth black raisins in his doughlike brown face.

"Yuh've got a loud bark, Masters," he said slowly, "but there's nothin' behind it. How long yuh figger yuh'd last if I threw my weight against yuh?"

"That's just what I came up here about," Master said grimly. "I think yuh've been pullin' a doublecross—you and Joel Benton."

"Yuh'd better be ready to back up what yuh say!" Cresset barked, as his face darkened with rage.

Masters faced the big man squarely, making no attempt to curb his temper.

"Have yuh forgot the deal yuh made with Benton and me?" he demanded hotly. "Our protection for you and yore gang of law-dodgers in return for certain favors yuh was to do—like rustlin' beefs from the Broken Spur and the Big E."

"I've kept my part of the bargain," Cresset growled. "I rustled one of yore herds the night Kyle Freeling was ambushed." He flashed a knowing grin. "Where's yore kick?"

"I'll tell yuh!" Masters snapped. "The agreement was for you to haze all Broken Spur cows across the divide and keep all the profits from the sale of the beefs. But the Big E critters were supposed to be held in a hidden valley on the other side of this range of mountains till Janet called it quits and sold out. I just learned today that yuh've been rebrandin' my cows with a B in a Box."

"Yuh're a cussed liar!" Cresset blazed. He glared at Masters, but there was a half-guilty look in his eyes and too much bluster in his voice.

"All right." Masters shrugged. "Suppose we take a look together."

He started to swing toward the door, but Cresset's curt, "Hold it," hauled him around. Cresset had the palm of his right hand resting on the butt of his Colt.

"We'll stay here," he said.

MASTERS laughed mirthlessly.

"That's my answer." He stared at Cresset intently. "Whose idea was it? Yores or Benton's?"

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," Cresset growled. Then a harsh thought flashed its lightning impression across his coarse-skinned face. "Say, what's keepin' yuh from takin' over the Big E? Yuh said with Salty gone and a few cattle raids Janet would clear out. Looks like yuh was wrong—or are yuh plannin' some booger play?"

"Leave Janet to me," Masters answered as he scowled. "I'll take care of her."

"Like Salty, Harley and Freeling?" Cres-

set goaded slyly.

"I don't know what *you're* talkin' about now!" Masters shouted angrily.

"Let it ride." Cresset's heavy shoulders shrugged. "Now, what else is on your mind?"

Masters glared at Cresset during a brief, uncomfortable silence. Then he said harshly:

"I've got a proposition to offer."

"Yeah?" Cresset drawled suspiciously. "What is it?"

"You know," said Masters in an easy, conversational tone, "that our original deal was based on the idea of the new railroad spur goin' through the valley. The right-of-way was almost shore to go across the Big E, Broken Spur and the B in a Box spreads. Harley Masters was supposed to bring a map with him, showin' the final route. But when he was killed in the saloon the map wasn't on him. That means somebody got to him. Mebbe it was you."

"That deputy marshal was the last one to see him alive," Cresset pointed out.

"I know. Well—never mind. Anyway, part of yore job was to rustle Hanald blind, till he had to pull out. I still want yuh to do that. As for the map, Garry or Benton must have it—I'm shore of that. I'll get Garry. But it's time to move and to move fast. We can clean up, you and me."

"How?" Cresset inquired slowly.

Masters did not answer at once. He was watching Cresset's eyes, gauging his temper.

"Throw in with me in wipin' out Benton," he finally said, "and I'll cut yuh into more money that yuh ever saw or dreamed of havin'."

Cresset looked startled at first. Then greed put a shine in his eyes.

"Let's have more details," he said.

"Take yore crew tomorrer night or the next night and go down and burn out the B in a Box. Let me know which night yuh plan to make the raid and I'll see that Claire is in town with me."

Cresset flashed a sneering grin. "So yuh still want her—after she made her play for the marshal."

"Cuss yuh!" Masters raged. "I told yuh I'd get Garry! And I'll have Claire, too, and her brother's ranch. If yuh throw in with me I can promise yuh a fortune!"

"And if I don't?"

A menacing chill seemed to hover over the room. Death lay between the two men at this moment. Each of them realized it. Then Masters said, in a cold, dead voice:

"Then this is the end of the trail for one of us."

CHAPTER XIX

Land Grabber's Greed

PRIMED for trouble, welcoming it, Bill Masters and Cresset faced each other. Cresset's hand remained on his gun-butt. Masters saw that and didn't care. He was suddenly sure of himself, sure of his ability to shade the big man on the draw.

Cresset, a little uneasy now, let his breath out in a long-drawn sigh.

"And suppose I side yuh?" he mumbled. "What then?"

"Yuh can have all of Benton's beefs—and Hanald's, too—and I'll give yuh a share in the profits of the combined operations of the three ranches."

"Make it a fifty-fifty share," Cresset said.

"All right," Masters agreed. He was brisk now and eager to have the matter terminated. "When will yuh take care of the B in a Box?"

"Tomorrer night." Cresset added thoughtfully, "Yuh want Benton out of the way?"

"What do you think?" Masters snapped.

There was no feeling in him. Just a hard core of purpose, a hunger for power and wealth that drove him implacably on.

"It's a deal," said Cresset.

It was significant that he did not smile. It was significant, too, that neither Cresset nor Masters made any attempt to shake hands. Instead, Masters stalked out the door to his horse and rode off.

The sentry picked him up and accompanied him through the gorge. At the far exit the outlaw ducked into hiding while Masters trotted on along the trail.

Night had come now, but the sky was bright with stars. In a little while the moon would be up, bathing all of these uplands in a silvery wash of light.

Masters kept the roan to a steady trot until he gained the concealment of the tangled brush that grew along the rim of the first high ridge. Riding directly into the chaparral, he dismounted and ground-tied the roan.

Then he slumped down to rest.

At the end of thirty minutes his vigil was rewarded. The sound of a rider coming at a rapid gait from the direction of Cresset's ranch pulled him to his feet. At last a big Morgan horse topped the ridge. In the saddle, bulking huge and dark against the light sky, was Cresset.

He sped past Masters' place of concealment. Masters let a minute go by, then remounted and set off after him.

Two miles farther on Cresset came to a fork in the trail, one fork leading to the Big E outfit, the other swinging off toward the B in a Box. When Cresset took the fork to Benton's ranch, Masters clucked in grim satisfaction and settled down to the pursuit.

Cresset raised a great cloud of dust when he skidded his big gelding to a halt in the front yard of the B in a Box. There was an excited look on his bruised features as he leaped to the ground.

The bunkhouse was dark, but lamplight gleaming from the front room of the rambling white ranchhouse sent him hurrying up the veranda steps.

Inside the living room, Joel Benton threw down the week-old newspaper he had been reading and rose from the deep barrel chair which had been pulled up to the table as Cresset rushed into the room. The big outlaw halted by the door, his eyes immediately arrested by the sight of Benton's right arm in a sling.

"What happened to yuh, Joel?" he demanded.

"Ed Garry," Benton answered meagerly. A quick, hot anger showed in his narrow-lidded glance.

"He was here?"

"Yeah."

"And yuh let him get away?" A derisive, half-amused grin spread across Cresset's face.

"Take a look in the mirror," Benton rasped. "See if you done any better."

"I'll get him, Joel," Cresset promised, as his eyes grew small and round and hard. "Mebbe not today. Mebbe not tomorrer. But I'll get him."

"Better make it soon. Me and Toler and one of the crew caught him upstairs goin' through my papers. He knows I'm Jed Northey and he's put two and two together to get the answer to the rustlin' deal."

"But Joel!" exclaimed Cresset. "Yuh mean there was three of yuh here and Garry got past yuh! How in blazes did he do it?"

"Never mind that," Benton snapped. "Toler's dead and I've got a smashed wrist. Now I want to know what brought you here."

Cresset studied him closely.

"Bill Masters paid a call on me tonight," he said finally.

"Masters!" Benton repeated. His eyes were sudden bright slits in a darkly alert face. "What did he want?"

"Somebody—I reckon it was Garry—told Masters about that Big E beef with yore brand on it. He figgers yuh've been runnin' a sandy on him right along. He's ready to turn the tables—with my help!"

CRESSET paused to let that sink in.

"Go ahead," Benton said savagely. "Let's have the rest."

"He wants to smash yuh, Joel. The idea is for me and my Shadow Hills crew to burn yuh out tomorrer night. There's a chunk of lead in it for you, and for me a fifty per cent split with Masters in the profits that come from runnin' the B in a Box and the Big E outfits together."

Benton muttered a low curse. "That doublecrossin', murderin' skunk!"

"Good offer, wasn't it, Joel?" Cresset asked, as his wolfish grin flashed.

"You know what kind of a split you'd get!" Benton snorted. "A forty-five slug in the back like Salty Masters got!"

"Joel," said a cool, hard voice from the door, "yuh shore called it right. Only he'll get the slug tonight, and there's an extra one for you."

Cresset's hands froze halfway toward his cartridge belt. Benton was staring at Bill Masters and the unwavering gun in his fist, so choked with rage that he couldn't speak.

Masters moved the Colt barrel slightly toward Cresset.

"I figgered yuh'd come runnin' to Benton about that deal I offered yuh," he drawled. "That's why I follered." The impulse to destroy was a fever in him, driving him on. "Better make yore play, because here it comes!"

Benton stabbed for his .45 with his left hand. He died with his fingers groping for the butt while the echo of Bill Masters' roaring gun reverberated through the room.

A hard grin spread across Cresset's face as he chipped in with a shot that hammered past Masters' cheek. Masters wheeled quick-

ly and fired point-blank at Cresset. The outlaw's huge form trembled with bullet shock and he toppled slowly to the floor, his gun slamming slugs into the plank flooring.

Upstairs there was the swift, light patter of footsteps. Then a faint, worried cry:

"Joel!"

The light feet ran along the upper hall toward the head of the stairs. Claire was coming to investigate the shooting. Bill Masters pivoted and raced out the door to the hitch-rack. He reached his horse, clambered into the saddle.

Some impulse he did not question led him to free Cresset's big Morgan horse and lead it away as he galloped across the shadow-dappled yard.

Once well away from the B in a Box he slowed down to a canter and paused to think over his situation. Joel Benton was dead, and so was Cresset. He had had a close call back there. Had he tarried a minute longer Claire would have walked in on him. As it was, he had barely got away in time.

A grim smile of satisfaction tugged at his thin lips as he realized that his luck was still running strong. Things were going to be all right. He was sure of that. Just two people remained in his way now. Just two people stood between him and the power he was angling for in Tumult. Two people—Janet and Ed Garry.

And because there was still time tonight to take care of Janet he put the spurs to his horse again. A plan was taking shape in his mind. He knew where to reach Janet and he knew how he could bring her to him. For too long now he had watched Janet run the Big E, the outfit he had always wanted for himself. Well, after tonight it would be his!

He rode fast, pushing his horse hard through the narrow aisles of timber until he found himself near the East Fork meadows. Then he pulled the animal in, drifting slowly to the edge of the trees, while he studied the lamplit line shack across the creek.

Suddenly the light winked out and two men moved through the doorway into the yard. They went directly to ground-hobbled horses. Freeing their reins, they jumped into their saddles. Then across the quiet darkness floated Leo Hanald's deep-pitched voice:

"You ride herd on them cows tonight, Lowry. I've got business in town. I'll send a man to spell yuh tomorrer night."

The two riders parted, Hanald speeding off toward town and Lowry jogging across the meadow toward the cows grazing on East Fork grass.

A hot gleam of interest brightened Masters' eyes as he regarded the deserted line shack and the dwindling figure of Lowry. Then, after he had allowed Hanald to get far enough ahead of him, he set the gelding into motion again. . . .

WHEN Masters finally halted, it was in the brush behind Sheriff Lance's neat white frame house. Opening one of the pockets in his saddle-bag, he withdrew a pad of paper and pencil. He scrawled a few lines on the top sheet, ripped it off the pad and replaced the pad and pencil in the saddle-bag. Then he tugged at the lead rope until Cresset's horse trotted up beside him.

He tacked the note to the empty saddle, unfastened the lead rope and gave the animal a slap on the rump. The horse went crashing through the bushes. Then, scenting fresh feed in the sheriff's barn, the animal turned toward it and vanished through the shadows

[*Turn page*]

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into the barn.

From his place of concealment in the trees, Masters watched the kitchen door swing open. Janet stepped out, her curly hair aglow in the amber shine of lamplight, and peered intently toward the barn.

Finally, she turned back inside, but reappeared a moment later, carrying a lighted lantern, and hurried across the yard. She entered the barn and remained inside so long that Masters began to shift impatiently.

He was circling through the brush toward the barn when she emerged, mounted on a spotted cowpony. The animal cantered across the yard, then broke into a gallop at the turn into the road.

Masters retreated into the brush. When Janet passed his hiding place he saw the look of desperation on her face as the moon sailed out from behind a bank of clouds, bathing the road in a flood of white light.

He waited until the spotted pony's progress was only a muted rumble in the distance, then swung the gelding out into the road to follow Janet.

CHAPTER XX

The Lure

FOR a time after leaving Benton's place, Ed Garry rode swiftly. He put several miles between himself and the B in a Box Ranch before pulling up. He climbed wearily out of saddle, loosened the roan's saddle girth, then stood stone-still in the trail, listening for the sound of approaching riders.

Except for the faint, far-off baying of some ranch dog and the rustling of tree branches the night was quiet and serene.

Pulling up his shirt, he fumbled awkwardly at the wound in his side. He felt a warm, sticky wetness. The gash was still bleeding some. The best he could do in the darkness and without water to cleanse the wound, was to tear off a big section of his shirt-tail and pack it against his torn skin.

That done, he considered his next move. Although he had been routed from Benton's place by superior numbers, his encounter with Benton had been productive of information. He knew for certain now that Benton was the wanted outlaw, Jed Northey, one of the two men he had come to Tumult to find.

It also was obvious now that Northey and Colt Redwood were linked in the rustling. But there was still the matter of the murders of Salty and Harley Masters and Kyle Freeling. And somehow there had been a ring of truth in Benton's voice when he had affirmed his innocence in those killings.

That left only one other place to search. The thought of that brought hard lines around Garry's eyes and mouth. But before he did anything else it occurred to him that part of the proof he needed to trap the murderer might even now be waiting for him in town.

He moved back to the roan, tightened the girth, and swung into saddle.

Forty minutes later he rode into town and stopped in front of the frame shack near the railroad depot that housed the telegraph office. He was about to step onto the walk when his attention was attracted by the curled-up brim of a dusty gray hat that stuck out of his saddle roll behind the cantle. Suddenly he remembered that he was still carrying Bill Masters' Stetson which he had taken as evidence after Masters had reported the attempted ambush upon himself.

Until this moment it had completely slipped Garry's mind. He pulled it out, punched it into shape and examined it carefully in the light issuing from the window of the telegraph office.

When Masters had first shown the hat to Garry, the deputy marshal had been troubled by something incongruous about it, something that didn't quite jibe with the facts as Masters had outlined them.

He turned the hat around in his hands, studying the blackened bullet-holes in the tall crown. He was about to return the sombrero to the cantle when he saw the simple, significant thing which had escaped him. The bullet-holes were so placed that it would have been impossible for the wearer not to have been killed by the ambusher's shot. One hole was an inch or two higher than the other, but both were at such an angle that the lead must have ploughed right through the skull of the person wearing the hat!

And yet Bill Masters hadn't been touched by the bullet! That could mean only one thing to Garry. Masters had fired the shot into his own hat—and from a position slight-

ly above it. That explained the downward angle the bullet had taken.

No one had tried to drygulch Masters. He had put those bullet holes in the sombrero himself, and for only one reason—to direct suspicion away from himself.

Seething with anger because he had missed the significance of this clue, Garry crushed the hat in his fist and strode into the telegraph office. The agent gave him a dour, unfriendly look.

"Got a wire for me?" Garry asked. "The name is Garry."

The agent got up and walked to a desk where he leafed through several telegraph forms. Finally, he drew out a yellow sheet and handed it to Garry.

"Came in an hour ago. Collect. That'll be two dollars."

Garry laid two silver dollars on the counter and strolled out, reading the message. It was from the Winchester Arms Company and said:

ED GARRY, DEPUTY U. S. MARSHAL, TUMULT, WYOMING: SPECIAL ISSUE WINCHESTER YOU INQUIRED ABOUT SOLD TO WILLIAM MASTERS BIG E RANCH.

WINCHESTER ARMS COMPANY

Garry's big hand closed around the telegram, crushing it into a wrinkled ball, his eyes narrowing.

Suddenly he whirled and moved to the roan. It was time to play the last hand in Tumult's game of life and death. He had all the evidence he needed now. His next move was clear. He had to get to the Big E Ranch fast.

THEN, minutes later, as he galloped along the wagon road leading out of town, he thought of Janet. He wondered, with an unaccountable uneasiness, if she was all right. There was no reason why she shouldn't be. And yet some instinct impelled Garry to swerve from the road and ride toward the Lance cottage to make sure Janet had not disobeyed his instructions and gone back to the Big E Ranch.

When he pulled up in the back yard of Sheriff Lance's place he vaulted from saddle, and ran up the kitchen steps just as Mrs. Lance flung open the back door. She drew back, startled by his unexpected appearance.

"Is Janet here?" he asked sharply, peering over her shoulder into the lighted kitchen. "I've got to see her."

"Why, I—I was just going to look for her," Mrs. Lance said, a little uncertainly. "Is anything wrong?"

Garry's big hands gripped her arms.

"Where did she go?" he asked, worry making his voice crisp.

"About ten minute ago," the widow told him uneasily, "Janet and I were in the living room. We heard a horse trot into the yard. Then everything was quiet. We wondered about it. Finally, Janet said she'd go outside to see about it."

"And you let her go?"

She saw the grim lines etched on Garry's face.

"I—I'm sorry. I never thought—"

"All right," Garry snapped. "What happened then?"

"Well, I waited. I heard the hoofbeats of a horse going away. I thought that whoever had come into the yard on that horse had ridden off. When Janet didn't come back right away I took it for granted that she'd gone to see that our horses in the barn were all right."

Garry dropped his hands from the widow's arms.

"That second hoss yuh heard was probably Janet ridin' away," he said.

"Oh, but she wouldn't! She'd given me her word."

"Yuh got a lantern?" he demanded. "I want to look in the barn."

Mrs. Lance turned back inside, then reappeared with a lighted lantern. Garry took it and hastened to the barn. He found four horses stabled there. One of them, wearing a big "C" brand, felt damply warm to his touch. It was a powerful, well-bred gelding—Cresset's own horse, no doubt. He was sure of the Shadow Hills brand, for he had seen other horses with the same marking at the renegade's ranch. But what was a Shadow Hills horse doing here?

Garry turned toward the door. Just beyond the raised wooden sill he saw a crumpled wad of paper. He picked it up—and instantly as Garry glanced at it he had the answer to what he wanted to know. It read:

Dear Janet:

If the Big E ever meant anything to you come at once to the old line shack at East Fork. Things are happening fast. I think I know who drygulched your father. I've been hurt—it's not serious—but you've got to come right away and *alone*. Remember that. I can lick this thing, but only with your help.

Bill

Garry hurled the note to the dirt floor. He saw it all now. Masters' plan was simple and devilishly clever.

That note had been framed in such a way that Janet would forget her promise not to leave Mrs. Lance under any circumstances. That hint that Bill had been hurt, and the hope he held out for solving the murders—all this was calculated to send Janet hurrying to the East Fork without a thought of what she might be riding into.

There was only one odd note. Leo Hanald had just hazed a herd of steers onto the East Fork graze. If Masters was planning anything against Janet, would he run the risk of encountering Hanald or his punchers at the East Fork?

Did it mean that Hanald had pulled out already? Or did it mean that whatever was to happen to Janet would happen *before* she reached the East Fork?

Garry rushed across the yard. As he climbed into saddle Mrs. Lance came out of the house. She called to Garry but he was already spurring out of the yard, so intent on speed that he didn't even hear her.

CHAPTER XXI

The Blackwell

MILES sped by under the hoofs of Janet's cowpony before she succeeded in bringing order to the tumult of thoughts that raced through her mind. Only then did it occur to her to wonder what Bill was doing at the East Fork line shack.

She remembered vividly her visit to the East Fork early that morning when she had learned that Leo Hanald had not only thrown a beef herd on the range, but had filed on the land through one of his punchers.

According to Ed Garry, Hanald was in the clear. If the land had actually been filed on, there was nothing the Big E could do, legally, to oust Hanald or his steers.

But if Bill was there now and if he had information about the identity of the killer of old Salty Masters, then that killing and the others which had followed it must be linked to Hanald and his murderous crew.

Instinctively she leaned forward, dug her heels into the flanks of her speeding cowpony. It was milling through her mind that the Winchester which Garry had found was no plant as he had believed it to be. It definitely marked Hanald as the murderer.

What had happened at the East Fork? This was the question which kept running through her mind. Had Bill and Leo Hanald already clashed? And why had Bill urged her to come alone?

For a moment she considered turning back to town for help, but even as the idea came to her she dismissed it. If Bill was seriously injured she could not risk losing any time in getting to him. She had to go on alone.

And yet, as she rode along the narrow, tree-shrouded trail a premonition of more trouble, of danger to herself, rose strongly to the surface of her mind. Her first excitement, her frenzied eagerness to reach the East Fork line camp were soon engulfed in a cold wave of uneasiness.

It was then, while her feelings were at a low ebb, and while her pony slowed to a canter near the crest of a wooded ridge, that she imagined she heard the sound of another horse behind her. She looked over her shoulder, studying the narrow trail that wound into black darkness below her, but she could see nothing.

She pushed the pony hard up the grade, then swung abruptly into a crevice between two brush clumps. Halted there, with the pony snorting to regain its wind and her own blood pounding heavily in her ears, she was unable to detect any unusual sounds.

She waited two minutes, but no one passed along the trail. Finally, she smiled ruefully—and a little nervously—and reined the pony out of the chaparral.

Because she sent the pony racing ahead at a fast gallop she failed to hear the horseman behind her—a man who had halted when she had halted—swing into motion again and finally vanish into a sidetrack in the timber.

Two or three times during the next fifteen minutes Janet slowed her mount's gait to listen for sounds of pursuit. At last, she gave it up and rode on until she came to the edge of the brush that guarded the junction of Jordan and Alamo Creeks.

The line cabin was in the huddle of trees on the far side of Alamo Creek, but she could barely make it out in the darkness. No light glimmered in the front window. It looked

completely deserted.

There was no moon. The only light came from the patches of starry sky where the heavy cloud masses had not yet piled up their fluffy covering.

Unaccountably Janet began to tremble. She was conscious of a shrinking sensation that was alien to her. But, courageous as she was, the very silence and desolation of the place seemed to charge it with secret, unseen peril.

Where was Bill? There was no sign of a horse. And no sign of Hanald's riders, or of Lowry who had supposedly filed on the land.

Something was wrong here. She felt reasonably certain about that. And yet, great as her unwelcome fear abruptly had become, she knew she had to go on.

Reluctantly she pushed out of the trees and rode down toward the creek. There were no night noises now. Everything was unnaturally still. She reached the ford. The pony splashed through the shallows, its hoofs ringing against the pebble-strewn creek bed.

She called once, in a strained, half-subdued voice:

"Bill! Where are you?"

Her words floated away into an empty, dismal silence. Her fear grew and grew until it seemed to envelop her with its expanding pressure, squeezing the breath from her body. She looked wildly about. Night, growing still darker as clouds piled high in the sky, thrust an invisible wall across the yard.

JANET forced herself to go on. But even her horse moved reluctantly, as if sensing the dread that held her taut.

When she was a hundred yards from the cabin, she dismounted and moved along on foot. The darkness seemed to close in, became more threatening. It was like a fine, cold mist washing against her.

Once again—hopelessly—she called:

"Bill!"

Then suddenly she froze into immobility. Cold moisture that was like tiny nettles stung her forehead.

Had she heard an answering cry? Or was it just her overwrought imagination? It had been a faint, elusive sound, blending with the echo of her own voice. It seemed to have come from around the far side of the cabin. She hurried in that direction.

"Bill! Where are you?"

There it was again. A choked, almost unintelligible call, answering her.

"Bill!—Bill!" she cried.

"Here!"

Janet sobbed in relief. There was no mistaking Bill's voice, faint though it was. Bill was here. He was alive!

She forgot her fear. The night no longer seemed menacing as she stumbled through the darkness.

"This way!" Bill was somewhere nearby.

She plunged ahead. Her right foot struck soft, sliding soil. She tried to stop her forward motion, but she had been half-running, and her momentum carried her on. Her left leg buckled, her foot stamping downward into empty space.

Panic hit her, then. She knew, in that fleeting instant while her body hung poised over black emptiness, where she was. But it was too late to save herself.

The night wind tore a scream from her throat before she hurtled into the abandoned well. . . .

That shrill scream, echoing through the night, reached Ed Garry as he galloped along the winding trail that led to the East Fork range. With a sharp cry of fear and anger he dug his spurs into the flanks of the jaded roan.

He burst out of the timber, stormed across the meadow to the ford. He hit the hock-deep stream, splashed through it and sent the roan clambering up the far bank.

The scream was repeated. High-pitched and larded with unutterable terror. Then silence.

Speeding across the yard, Garry placed the source of that cry. It came from the side of the cabin where the abandoned well had been rotting through the years under its covering of weather-beaten planks. And with a dismal rush of knowledge he knew that Janet had been trapped in that well!

The roan was still going at a dead run when Garry leaped from saddle with a coil of rope dangling from his fist.

"Janet—Janet!" he called. "Hold on!"

"Ed!" came a frenzied answer. "Oh, Ed, you're here!"

Garry ran on through the thick, clinging shadows. His keen vision showed him the slab of stone that had once been used to cover the well, but which now was broken in half. He saw, too, the deep wedge of darkness that was the well. The weatherbeaten planks had been removed from the yawning abyss.

In a leap he reached the edge of the well;

dropped the coil of rope to the ground and quickly fashioned a loop. He peered down into the well, but the blackness was complete.

"I'll have yuh out in a minute!" he called.

"Hurry, Ed!" Janet's answer floated hollowly up to him. "I can't—"

There was frantic desperation in her voice, but he failed to catch the rest of what she called, for a branch snapped somewhere behind him and he whirled. He dropped the rope and dug for his gun.

A lurching body hurtled against him. Thrown off-balance, Garry flung up an arm as he tried to twist away from his attacker. The maneuver pushed him toward the loose dirt that ringed the well. A down-swinging gun-barrel smashed through his feeble guard. He took the blow above his right ear.

His senses dimmed, he reeled, and toppled over the rim. The stagnant water closed over him as he sank to the bottom.

Shocked back to full awareness by the frigid bite of the water, he pushed himself up to the surface. He tried to stand, but the level of the water was over his head. Again he lunged upward, fighting and gasping for air, until he slammed against Janet huddled in a niche in the rock well wall the musty blackness. He could barely discern the pale oval of her face.

"Are you all right?" she asked huskily.

"Yeah. But you—hold tight! The water's over your head!"

"I'm all right." Janet's teeth were chattering, but she spoke bravely. "Some of the rocks have fallen out of the wall. I've found a place to hold on."

GARRY kept treading water beside her, his arms moving in circles.

"Do you think we can get out of here?" Janet asked uneasily. "Bill is up there—maybe he isn't too hurt to help."

"We can try," Garry cut in quickly.

"Give it up, Garry," Bill Masters called down from the edge of the well. "Yuh're finished."

"Does that go for Janet too?" Garry shouted back.

"Bill," Janet called indignantly, "what's happened to you? Why don't you do something to get us out of this well?"

"It's no use, Janet," Garry said, splashing over to the wall and finding a break in the rocks to which he could cling to and keep his head above water level. "Yuh're just wastin' yore breath."

"What do you mean, it's no use?"

"There's no time to spare yore feelings, Janet," Garry said in a voice that was harsh with rage: "I don't know how yuh got down here, but I'd guess yore cousin, Bill, either led yuh into the trap or pushed yuh in—like he did me. Yuh see, this is the final move in the game of life and death he's been playin' in Tumult."

"I—I can't believe that!" Janet choked. Then she peered upward at Masters. "Bill, you must be mad! You can't do this!"

"Time's run out for you, Janet," Bill Masters called down. "And for Garry, too. Yuh had yore chance to pull up stakes a long while ago after—well, after yore old man was—I mean died."

"He means," Garry said grimly, "that he expected yuh to quit on the Big E after he murdered yore father." He heard the shocked intake of Janet's breath, saw her wide horrified eyes in the dimness. "It's not a pretty story—yuh can guess the rest of it."

Garry broke off, groping for his gun. It was gone. He had lost it in his plunge to the bottom of the well. His head was throbbing and the muscles in his right arm were aching with strain. He couldn't hold on much longer. He heard Janet draw in a sobbing breath and knew her strength was ebbing fast.

Certain death waited for them both if they let go.

"Go ahead and finish the job!" Garry yelled up to Masters. "Yuh've got six bullets in yore Colt. That ought to be enough."

Masters laughed mirthlessly.

"No, Garry. A gun makes too much noise. Hanald's herd is only a mile away. There's no night hawk guardin' the critters, but if some ranny should be ridin' from town and heard a shot, he might come over for a look-see. I've got a better way—quiet and shore. Just shove half of that concrete slab into the well. It'll jam the sides halfway down and yuh'll be bottled up for good."

"Better start now," Garry called grimly, "because I'm on my way up!"

The thin white moon of his face vanished into the darkness. Garry swung around to the wall. Janet's tremulous voice reached him in a faint, hollow whisper.

"Ed, is there a chance?"

"Mebbe," he said. "Yore cousin won't have an easy time draggin' that block of stone over to the well. I've got to count on that—and on the well wall havin' enough broken areas for

me to find hand and foot-holds. Wish me luck, Janet!"

CHAPTER XXII

Retribution

QUICKLY Ed Garry drew his body upward, his arm muscles straining while he groped with the toes of his boots for crevices. He found a place for his right foot, jammed the boot into the hole and began climbing.

Up and up he moved through thick, musty darkness. It was a slow, laborious progress. It taxed his strength and it taxed his nerves, for he never knew when he might reach a spot in the wall where there would be no further breaks. If that happened it would be all over for him and Janet.

The darkness began to lose its depth. He moved through a kind of gray-black twilight that permitted him to discern the outline of the stones above him. He knew, then, that he was near the top. At the same time, he heard a thumping sound, followed by a labored gasp. That would be Masters striving to drag the broken stone slab over to the well.

Again Garry drew himself upward. His fingers were raw and bleeding. The wound in his side was beginning to punish him once more.

There was a louder thud above him. A clod of dirt struck his face. He looked up. The huge, flat side of the concrete block loomed right at the edge of the well.

Garry ascended another foot just as Masters appeared beside the great rock slab, on his hands and knees. He was panting for breath, and looked exhausted.

Suddenly, as he sighted Garry, he yanked out his gun and lunged on hands and knees toward the deputy marshal. Garry was lifting himself over the rim of the well when Masters' gun descended in a vicious arc.

Garry jerked his head to one side and flung himself upward. His right hand caught Masters' swinging arm, trapped it in a steel-hard grip. He pulled Masters forward and down. Masters teetered on bent knees in the soft earth, then pitched over Garry's head. The next instant Garry slid backward and followed Masters in a plunge to the bottom of the well.

Once more the cold, dank water swept over him. His down-driving boots landed on Master's back, then caromed off and carried him to the slimy ooze at the base of the well. He splashed around, got tangled with Masters, and abruptly pushed clear, his head above water.

"Ed—Ed!" Janet called nervously in the darkness.

"All right," he said, and waited for the splash that would tell him that Masters had come to the surface.

But the water remained still. Garry let himself sink to the bottom. He fanned his arms outward. Almost at once they struck Masters' legs in a doubled-up, cramped position. His hands skidded along Masters' chest and neck to his face, he got a grip around the man's neck, hauled him upward.

Only when he reached the surface did Garry become aware of the unnatural tilt of Masters' head and realized that the killer was dead. He relinquished his grip, then, and let Masters sink back into the water.

He paddled over to Janet, striking against her in the gloom.

"Ed," she whispered. "Is Bill—"

"Dead," he told her tersely. "Broken neck."

He heard the sharp intake of Janet's breath and added, "Better hang onto me for a spell." His big hands found an opening in the wall and fastened there.

She groped toward him, rested her weight on his shoulder until she signified she was all right. Then she pushed back to the hand-hold in the wall she had been using.

Garry set about climbing to the top again. When he reached the ground ten minutes later he hurried to the cabin for a storm lantern. He came back with it, touched a match flame to the low wick and set the lantern on the ground close to the edge of the well.

He whistled for the roan and when the animal came trotting toward him he took up one end of the reata, fastened it to the horn, and dropped the looped end down into the well.

Picking up the storm lantern, he held it at arm's length over the edge so light would reach the crouching Janet.

"Get that loop under yore armpits," he told her, "and draw it tight. When yuh're ready I'll haul yuh to the top."

He could barely see the movement of her arms as she fumbled with the rope.

"Ready!" she finally called.

Garry began to pull her toward the top. To help him, Janet braced her feet along the rock wall, walking upward with each firm tug on the rope.

When she reached the top and clambered over the edge, Garry's arm gathered her against him and he held her close. She huddled there, her head on his chest, her arms around his neck, not saying anything.

At last she pushed him gently away.

"I wasn't sure I'd ever be held in your arms again," she said with a sad, slow smile that showed her physical and emotional weariness.

"Better sit down and rest," he answered. "Yuh can't take much more than yuh've already taken tonight."

HE WAITED until she had sunk down to the grass with her back propped against the bole of a cottonwood. Then he went back to the roan. He shortened the rope, dallied the end a couple of times around the looped portion into the well.

Clambering over the rim, he got his hands on the rope and slid down into the cool, dark depths. He released his hold on the rope when he hit the water.

Ten minutes later he was back on top again and had hauled Masters' limp body up beside him. The young rancher's eyes were open, staring sightlessly upward. Patches of black mud clung to his clothes.

Garry picked up the lantern and went over to the cottonwood to Janet. He was reaching down to pull her to her feet when he stopped as he heard a horse splashing through the creek shallows.

Without a gun, Garry drew Janet back toward the cabin. There might be a rifle or a Colt somewhere inside.

Horse and rider came steadily on, swinging across the flats toward the line shack. Suddenly Janet held back, resisting the pull of Garry's hand.

"Wait, Ed!" she murmured. "It's Claire Benton."

They stopped, then, and waited for Claire to approach. She was passing the well when her horse shied. She glanced down at the deep grass and her fingers tightened on the reins as she pulled the animal to a halt. She kept looking down for moments. Then she lifted her head and rode stiffly on toward Garry and Janet.

"I see it's all over," she said to Garry. "You got Bill."

Garry was startled. He looked at Claire, shocked by her cold, unnatural calm. Her face was empty So were her eyes. Empty and without hope. Watching her, Garry knew that he was seeing a woman who had been whipped by the crowding events of her life until she was beyond pain or feeling.

"How did yuh know?" he asked. "About Bill, I mean?"

"He killed Joel and Eli Cresset an hour ago," she said, in a voice that was utterly without life or spirit.

An involuntary cry escaped Janet. Her eyes were wide in a face that was white and stricken.

"Oh, no—Claire!"

"Yes," came Claire's toneless reply. "I was upstairs in the attic, going through an old trunk for some curtains. I heard shooting. By the time I got downstairs Joel was dead and Cresset was dying. Cresset told me that Bill had been there and had shot them both."

"Do you believe him?" Janet asked.

"He had no reason to lie. Besides, I found a spur near the door. It had the initials W.M! It was Bill's. I've seen it often enough to know."

"But why, Claire? Why?"

"They were all crooked. Joel, too. They worked together on the rustling. Bill was helping to steal your cattle. Joel and Cresset were doublecrossing Bill somehow—rebranding the cattle, I reckon, in Joel's brand instead of just selling them. That's about all I know. Cresset died before he could finish."

"I know the rest," Garry said. "None of it is pretty. I'm sorry for you, Claire—sorry about Joel and Bill, too."

"What are you sorry for?" she said dully. It was as if something had withered and died within her, nad what was left was incapable of feeling. "They were three of a kind. And Bill was the worst of them." She looked straight at Garry. "Did he kill Janet's—I mean, Salty and Harley Masters."

Garry nodded slowly and watched Claire's lips tighten. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw the shine of tears in her eyes. Then suddenly she gave them both a wooden smile and slapped the reins against her pony's neck. The animal trotted away.

"Claire!" Janet cried. "Wait! Don't go."

Claire stopped and looked around.

"Would you have me stay here after all

that's happened?" she called back. "I've got to get out. There's nothing in Tumult for me."

Janet stood uncertainly in the clearing, the yellow rays of the lantern striking across her fair face. Garry moved up beside her.

"She's right, Janet," he said. "Let her go."

JANET turned slowly toward Garry. They heard Claire's pony moving away across the flats as they stood there, side by side, watching her cross the ford, finally to vanish into the trees.

"Somehow I can't help feeling sorry for her," Janet said at last. "She's all alone."

"Shore. But nothin' you or I might do could help her."

For a moment Janet kept staring at the gap in the timber into which Claire had disappeared. Then she turned back to Garry.

"I suppose you'll be going, too," she said wistfully, "now that your work in Tumult is done." Her eyes met his briefly. "Your work and your badge—they mean a lot to you."

Garry returned her glance, wondering if in the dim darkness she could see the color he felt rising in his face.

"Yes, they do mean a lot," he agreed. "But not as much as yuh think."

"You mean?" She spoke softly. He could see her eyes, and they were shining. He had never seen them so bright.

He stepped close, pulled Janet to him. He kissed her hard and hungrily. And she returned his kiss with an ardor that matched his own, until at last he lifted his head and said: "That's what I mean."

"I'll Pay a Thousand for Yore Outfit—or I'll Take It From Yuh at the Point of a Gun!"

THAT WAS the choice Lou Kyle gave stout-hearted cowboy Mack Jarvis—but Mack didn't scare easy, and he was prepared to fight! Kyle, who wanted him out of the way, was a range-grabbing hombre who headed an outlaw-killer band of despoilers dedicated to terror, slaughter and plunder—and it's against this powerful, evil crew that Mack Jarvis dares to pit himself, lone-handed, in a yarn bristling with fast action!

THE RIDERS OF CARNE COVE

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL!

Texas Longhorns

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Cattleman Sam Day holds forth on the nature, habits, history and influence of those "ornery critters" of the Western range!

SAM DAY was an old Texas cattleman. "It ain't in no ways necessitous to elucidate on how Texas and the longhorn was practically simultaneous in originatin' the Western cattle industry," he once told me. "They was borned together. And both of 'em was tough as a boot.

"While Texas might of done better in the matter of pioneer manners regardin' whose cow was whose, or how much range a man could legally grab with the aid of a six-gun, I always allowed the longhorn couldn't help it none. He was gaited by nature and the force of circumstance to be ornery—a sort of predestined bad actor from the start.

"Nonetheless the longhorn has been duly honored in the archives of the Lone Star State. The mossy horns of 'Old Blue,' lead steer that pirooted thousands of Charlie Goodnight's cattle up the long trail to the Panhandle and beyond, now repose plumb glorified in a Texas museum along with other pure-blood Texas artifacts."

Sam paused a decent interval. Long enough to give me time to notice that his glass was empty, and rectify the oversight.

When I knew Sam, the bandy-legged, salty little cuss had a white circle of beard all around his genial, full-moon face. As a rule his barside costume was a rusty black frock coat, faded, flower-patterned fancy vest, and a low-crowned black hat, greenish with age and exposure to the Texas sun.

His store-bought trousers were tucked into expensive, high-heeled cowboy boots. A heavy gun-belt invariably sagged at his waist, the smooth, worn holster casing a pearl-handled .45 in excellent working condition.

Sam was quite a character. He had money in the bank. In fact he could have bought and sold his local hometown bank a dozen times if he had been so minded. And he owned thousands of acres of rich Texas land, much of it worth a hundred dollars an acre, and up. Moreover it was land on which no mortgage plaster had ever been slapped since Sam's forbears first obtained it in the days of Sam Houston and the Texas Republic.

Old Blue and the Goodnight Herd

For all his odd appearance and his rich vernacular—a language virtually all his own—Sam Day was no hick. Anyone making that mistake would have been badly fooled. Sam was a shrewd business man. Earlier in his career, he had matched wits with Wall street and Chicago financiers. And come out on top of the deals.

The old cattleman had worked many a longhorn herd in his time. While he was not a man to let the limitations of naked fact

This mealy-nosed, big-boned, short-coupled, long-legged, slabsided steer with the drooping left horn and the "who-are-you?" look in his off eye is considered "bad medicine" among the Wichita Refuge riders, but nonetheless is a good longhorn specimen. It is six feet from the ground to the high spot in his irregular backbone. Symmetrical horns are the exception rather than the rule

spoil a good story, often his wildest tales were—believe it or not—true.

Take the remark about Old Blue's horns, for instance. Charles Goodnight did have a longhorn steer by that name. Goodnight, along with his partner, Loving, were the first to blaze a cattle trail north to the Panhandle, and later up through Colorado to Cheyenne. Over this trail in the heyday of the great

United States Dept. of the Interior photos

This group illustrates the various color patterns which make up a Longhorn herd. The animals range from solid colors of red, black, yellow and white—rarely blue—to calicoes, brindles, stripes, spotted, speckled and indescribable patterns labeled as "pied." That's a brown with the white forehead patch on the left; a "pied" steer in the left center foreground; and a calico third from the right

cattle drives, moved millions of longhorns. Many of them went direct to a market, but an almost equal number were driven on to spread the foundations of the pioneer cattle industry throughout the length and breadth of the northern range country.

Old Blue led herd after herd of Goodnight's stock up the trail. The wise old lead steer knew the route, the stopping places, and the waterholes as well as Goodnight and his riders did. The widespread horns that once adorned Old Blue's shaggy head now hang prominently on the walls of the Texas Panhandle-Plains Historical Society Museum in Pioneer Hall on the campus of the West Texas State Teachers College.

You can see them if you visit the College at Canyon, about seventeen miles south of Amarillo. Canyon, now a seat of learning, used to be a ruckus-raising cowtown in the Texas Panhandle.

"Injuns and longhorns caused the pioneers most trouble," according to Sam. "But the cattle was a cash crop—for their hides and taller. That was before cattle drives to the north and such railhead market towns as Dodge City and Abilene, Kansas, took aholt.

"Don't get notional about them Dodge City trail drives. They was the openers in the game. The first drives was over the Old Beef Trail. It run from east Texas to New Orleans, but with longhorns bringin' only a few dollars a head on the hoof, it didn't pan out as a financially happy enterprise. It was easier butcherin' the longhorns where they grew, and shippin' the hides and taller."

Sam was right. The longhorn's fame got off to a slow start.

The Origin of the Longhorn

Originally longhorns were Spanish cattle, brought over from the Old World by the earliest Spanish explorers and Conquistadores. At least five hundred head of such cattle are known to have been brought into what is now Texas by Coronado, as far back as 1541. Some of these, escaping and wandering into the Texas wilderness, were probably the progenitors of the vast herds of wild longhorns the settlers found in the country when they arrived.

The longhorns survived and multiplied because of the rich, native forage the land afforded, their natural toughness, and the additional fact that Indians seldom bothered them. The Indians preferred their traditional buffalo meat to longhorn beef.

"If yuh ever get around to describin' the varmints fer the book-readin' public," confided Sam, "yuh can pull out all the stops. Full-growed, they was prodigious-framed cows. Long-legged, tall, lean and lengthy fore and aft, every longhorn was gifted with

a disposition yuh wouldn't hang on yore mother-in-law.

"Most hombres know, or dang well ought to, that perambulatin' afoot in any Western cow pasture can be dangerous to the human torso. Range cattle, accustomed to bein' handled by men on hosses get ideas concernin' two-legged animals. They figger such are somethin' to be nudged, horned, or tromped on.

"The longhorn went 'em one better. He played no favorites, bein' as eager to wheel on and attack a cowboy on horseback as to jump a unmounted, green-gilled tenderfoot. Longhorns fought wolves and licked 'em regular. They likewise have been known to fight a bear and win the battle.

"Them long, swingin' dagger-pointed horns was plenty lethal. Horns on the average longhorn steer run to a six-foot spread, with nine foot about the record. Cow's horns was a mite shorter, and a bull's horns shorter still. Added to them twin weapons, a longhorn could use his hoofs with lightnin' speed and shameful accuracy.

"Yuh better mention too. . . . No son, this next's on me. A feller my age needs a drop of medicine to keep his innards warm." Sam went on to explain then: "A longhorn's horns kept growin' as long as the critter lived, gatherin' wrinkles at the base—and sometimes moss.

"As to color, longhorns come in most any shade yuh could think of, and combinations of the same. They was black, brown, brindled, dun, chestnut, roan, spotted, white-splotched and buckskin."

A Rough Job of Chousing

Chousing longhorns out of the south Texas brush was a rough job for any cowboy. The wild cattle had formed the protective habit of hiding in thick mesquite copses, or chaparral jungles during the day and coming out to graze on the more open country grass at night.

Winter was the favored season to seek out and run wild cattle. Some of the brush—black chaparral for instance—is green all year. But most of it, and most of the trees, shed their leaves in the winter months. This afforded the brushpopper better visibility than was possible during summer.

Moreover, working in midsummer heat, trying to run a wild longhorn into an open space big enough to permit roping him with a short throw, was arduous, fatiguing work. Hard on men and horses alike.

There was an additional consideration. Longhorns resisted capture with all the fervor of any wild animal. Riding them down in summer sometimes meant that the longhorns would literally run themselves to death in their attempt to escape the pursuing cowboy. They ran until the combination of heat and exhaustion dropped them dead in their tracks.

" 'Course in later years after some of them critters got half-tamed and built up into regular branded herds, the longhorn had his good points far as pioneer ranchin' went," explained Sam.

"He was a born long-distance traveler. Wasn't ever no other bovine could of made them drives hundred of miles through all kinds of wilderness and stood up to 'em like the longhorn done. He traveled fast too, for a cow. And he could eat less and drink less crossin' desert country and still live, than anything I ever seen.

"Mebbe that's on account of he was thin and framey to begin with. Also I claim longhorns give the early Texas cowboy his likin' for canned milk. Myownself, I got my start as a cowhand milkin' longhorns.

"Before my folks settled in Texas they was Ohio farm folks. They just naturally figgered milkin' was a young-un's chore. Not havin' no tame bossy along with us when we moved West made no difference.

" 'Sam,' my ma said, 'there's plenty of 'em out in the brush. Get yuh a mammy cow with a young calf and don't spill the squeezin's when yuh ride back.' "

One Way to Milk a Cow

Sam Day smiled at the recollection of those distant yesteryears in the Texas cattle country.

"Ma oversimplified things," he said finally. "It wasn't that easy. Pa helped me the first couple of times, but after that I was on my own.

"We had a sort of corral or pen not far from the cabin, and the first thing, after findin' a suitable milk dispenser, was to rope the doggone calf and drag it into the pen, makin' it fast to the fence. If luck was with yuh, Mamma Longhorn, after sniffin' suspiciously, would foller her bawlin' offspring into the pen. Then yuh shut the bars on Mamma.

"But ropin' the cow, tyin' her up short and

lashin' her hind legs together to keep from gettin' yore brains kicked out when yuh reached for the spigots was no job for the timid. Besides, when yuh finally coaxed one of them longhorns into givin', there was nothin' lavish about her bounty. A cupful was a pretty good milkin'.

"In time, say, two-three weeks, some of them longhorn cows gentled. Leastways they reverted to their destiny enough so's yuh could milk 'em without tyin' 'em. But most of 'em never did.

"Bein' it took four, five wild cows to keep a family in milk, a kid who could handle the milkin' chore with no help other than his lass rope and cow pony, was danged near a full-blown cowhand—ready to ride the range with his elders.

"My first pay as a regular hand I squandered sumptious on a gift for Ma. Had her ten cases of canned cow juice shipped out from Austin. Personal, I ain't drunk no other kind ever since. The idea of fresh milk sort of clabbers on me."

When the Boom Came

Trail-driving Texas longhorns to market, reached amazing proportions after the Civil War. Drovers and cattle-raisers alike, made money on the deal. Most of the meat went direct to Eastern markets, but there were also Army contracts and contracts for beef for Indian reservations to fill. The longhorn was in his prime and Texas rapidly climbed to first place in the nation's beef industry—a position it still holds today.

With the boom on, and the discovery that Texas cattle could winter through on the open range of such northern range states as Wyoming and Montana, longhorns were driven further and further north, to establish the spreading beef business. Main shipping points for northern cattle, frontier towns that sprang into lusty being as the advancing network of railroads fingered out across the West, included Ogallala, Nebraska—Miles City, Montana—Cheyenne, Wyoming, and even Regina and Moose Jaw across the northern border in Canada.

Longhorn herds, too, were fanned out across the Southwest into Arizona and New Mexico wherever range was available.

By 1880, all of some five million longhorns, descendants of the first wild Spanish cattle to be choused out of the south Texas brush, had been driven north, either direct to market or for stocking Northern ranches. But by that time the range picture was changing. Fences were coming into being and with the advent of fences, by means of which a rancher could hold his herds separate and distinct from those of his neighbors, enterprising cattlemen began introducing better beef breeds onto the Western ranges.

Breeds that would dress out into high-class meat, rather than the leathery longhorn beef, ate no more grass than their predecessors and brought better market returns. As a lesser argument, the longhorn, with his always half-wild temperament and long, clashing horns, was not as well adapted to crowded stock car shipment as more docile shorthorn animals.

Shorthorns were brought West as early as the 1870s. Though there were still years of transition period ahead, their coming marked the beginning of the end for the longhorn as king of the Western cattle range country. In quick succession, pureblood Angus and Galloway stock followed the shorthorns West. Then came the Herefords. And it was the Herefords—chunky, meaty animals producing a maximum of top quality beef—that finally nosed out all other breeds, and became pre-eminent on the Western range.

Enter the White-Face

By or even before 1900, "white-faces" had virtually supplanted the old longhorn stock everywhere. The swing was most rapid on the northern ranges. But eventually it even reached into Texas, native home of the longhorns.

The longhorn was doomed. Soon after the turn of the Twentieth Century, he went the way of the buffalo. He vanished from the Western scene to become mostly a memory, or, like Old Blue's horns, a sentimental relic and a museum piece.

"Speakin' for myownself," Sam Day told me on another occasion when we were discussing his favorite topic, "I hated to see the varmints depart. Cantankerous and hard to handle as they was, they marked a glorious era in Western cattle history. And they had qualities that was mighty useful in the Southwest.

"Summer heat in Texas, the blazin' kind that'll wilt a pureblood Hereford down to listless day-dreamin', never bothered a longhorn. And a day-dreamin' cow don't eat. He don't put on weight, which means he ain't

returnin' the proper interest on his investment.

"Though I've cussed 'em plenty I've knowed where a longhorn single-handed played Dan Cupid to a range romance and kept a cowboy from losin' his gal. That's a fact, son. It was all on account of how good a longhorn can smell—specially water.

"The case I'm thinkin of must by now be in the book of good doin's recorded in Longhorn heaven. It happened a long while back. Not to me, but to a wild sort of no-account Texas rannihan I once met up with in the Big Bend country.

"Come the time when this feller got his heart roped by a real fine gal. Love had him down and ready for brandin'. He was all set to gallop off to the nearest preacher, have the knot tied, and settle down. But the gal says forty and found, and a rovin' cowboy ain't her notion. He's got to settle down a heap more substantial than that before she's willin' to accept a life of wedded bliss.

"That slows this rannihan up like a chuck-wagon in mud time. But not for long. He decides to become a full-blooded rancher and locates a piece of range he can claim in Arizony. While he's projectin' hisself around those parts, he likewise cottons onto a nice payin' army beef contract. But it's got to be filled in a specified time or Uncle Sam don't pay off at the bank.

"He's sittin' pretty. Except he ain't got no cattle yet, a oversight on his part in his enthusiasm to get into big business. The missus-to-be points it out to him and says she'll wait, meantime givin' him a E for effort."

A Dry Trek

Sam Day grinned, as he saw my long face.

"Take it easy, son," he advised. "The longhorns is comin' to the rescue. This fellow, frantic with heartache, locates a herd of Mexican longhorns he can buy for a song down south of the Border. Roundin' up a few friends willin' to help the cause of true love, the bunch straps on their shootin' irons and rides for Mexico.

"Once they get down to Mañana Land and this feller pays for the stock, he finds out why they're so cheap. The cattle are legitimate as the State statutes. But it's a dry year. There's been a drought afflictin' the country and them longhorns is pore, scrawny creatures, ga'nt as a pile of scantlin's.

"Case yuh don't know, the drive up through southern Arizona is mostly desert and a dry haul any time. In a drought year it was suicide. But this rannihan tries it. His friends had to go back anyhow, so they figger they might as well push the longhorns along with 'em.

"For the first few night camps, there's some water, but it's mighty brackish. After that there ain't none at all, and the heat of Hades comes billowin' out of Arizony's desert sand like it was pourin' out the seams.

"Comes a night when they ain't no use stoppin'. The whole sorry cavalcade might as well drag on as drop in their tracks. This love-prompted rannihan is in the lead. He don't give no order to mill the herd and make camp at dusk. There ain't no use. Even their saddle canteens is bone-dry.

"The stock, after the fashion of their kind, has been bellerin' all day. Suddenly the rannihan listenin' to the chin music of the bovines behind him, twists in the saddle. There's a new note, like hope reborn, issuin' from them dumb brutes.

"Off to the right of the trail sets a group of barren hills toward which the locoed herd is veerin'. Next instant the lead steer, a mossy-horned old-timer, starts off at a bellerin' trot for a canyon-walled break in them hills."

The Water Call

Again Sam paused. This desert talk was making him dry. That had to be corrected.

"Wore out as they was," he went on as he wiped his mouth, "the rannihan's friends spur out in the growin' darkness, tryin' to head off the stampede.

"'Leave them gorgeous critters be!' hollers the rannihan. 'That's a water call the lead steer's bellerin'. There's water in them hills! That danged old longhorn smelled it miles back. I seen him sniffin', which same is why I didn't make no camp at sundown!'

"The rannihan's right as four aces. So's the longhorn. When them fellers follow the stampedin' herd with their hosses they cross over a low divide at the canyon head and plumb drop into Paradise. On the other side of the divide's a lost basin. High tules and and rank salt grass border a big saucer of crystal-clear, cool water. The longhorns is already plungin' into it, nose down, and slurpin' up the stuff with a noise like shootin' Chinese firecrackers on Christmas Eve.

"Later that evenin' when the men is camped around the supper fire back a piece from the natural water-hole, one of the fellers, who's mebbe soured on the female gender on account of three bad tries at matrimony, takes a final pull at his fresh-filled canteen and nods towards the rannihan.

" 'If I was him,' he says, 'I'd marry that mossy-horned lead steer. Specially was I goin' to live in Arizony. Ain't no gal ever born could smell water as far as that dadblamed old longhorn.'

"Course the rannihan don't take the advice. He stays at the water-hole a few days. He fattens up them longhorns on free grass till they look almost presentable. Then he drives 'em on in to the Army depot, collects his money, buys a shoestring starter herd of good cattle, and marries the gal of his choice.

"He turned into a pretty steady feller an' a good cattleman too, what with a wife and seven growin' kids to support as the years went on. It shows yuh," concluded Sam, "what a longhorn can do for a feller if yuh just give the critter a chance."

Staging a Comeback

There is a topper to old Sam Day's tales about the longhorn. I doubt if he knows it yet because Sam doesn't get up to Oklahoma often. Mebbe he'll read it here in WEST, his favorite Western "readin' book."

Anyhow the news is this. The longhorn may be heading for a comeback on the Western range. There's a good authority behind this statement. Today more than two hundred first-class specimens of real longhorns are being grazed under careful Government supervision on the twenty-thousand-acre range of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge at Cache, Oklahoma. There's a smaller herd of perhaps a dozen in the Fort Niobrara Refuge at Valentine, Nebraska.

These animals, the last of the living longhorns, are not mere museum pieces or zoo specimens. They have beeen and are being checked right along by Government scientists who believe they still have the making of first-class range stock, especially adapted to rigorous grazing conditions.

As Sam Day often said, old-time Texas cattlemen have known right along that the longhorn has certain points that made him hard to beat. For instance his ability to get along in the hot, arid regions of the Southwest. And the fact that a longhorn will travel further to reach water than will modern beef breeds, Herefords included.

Checking longhorns on what was formerly considered their greatest drawback—beef output—the Government experts have found after years of testing, that under reasonably favorable range conditions, the leggy cattle will develop into large, filled-out beef animals. Often they actually get fat, the steers running to about seventeen hundred pounds, with some tipping the scales at two thousand. Bulls weigh about eleven hundred pounds.

Officials at the Wichita Refuge claim the longhorns in their experimental herds will dress out as much beef per hundred pounds liveweight as will the breeds that supplanted them. And it may be that in the near future, modern longhorns may again be grazing on at least part of the vast Western range that is their heritage.

There's one thing, however, that hasn't yet been bred out of the longhorn. Perhaps it never will be. That's his hair-trigger temper. He's as mean as ever. Sam Day could probably have told the experts that. The longhorn was, as Sam so often said, "a natural born bad actor from the start."

And Sam might have added, "Did yuh ever try to milk a longhorn cow?"

Read the spectacular true story of the wildest, rip-snortingest of the bonanza boom towns — where the West's most famous characters passed in review and where fortunes were made — and lost — overnight!

DEADWOOD GULCH

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Coming in Next Month's Issue!

As the malamute lingered, Kolzig's revolver exploded

A White Phantom Story

IN QUEST OF DEATH

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Man and wolf band together for humanity's welfare when a gang of international crooks covets a scientist's secret!

OLAK, the White Phantom wolf king, sprang to all fours at a sudden signal from his silver-black mate, Sanyek. Olak leaped to his feet and lunged to attack, all in the one movement—so it seemed to the man, Tuk Cramer, standing screened by the nearby wild fruit thicket.

It was with amazement that Tuk Cramer half-swung and glimpsed the cause of Olak's sudden attack. Four savage-looking half-wolf dog creatures had come down on the lair zone of the White Phantom. Their appearance was cause for much concern in Tuk's mind, for they must have been brought in by man!

Tuk, and his lovely Indian wife, Netan,

Netan's brother Tan, and Lal, the white girl who lived with them in the cabin by the springs, had been requested by Corporal Dan Martin, of the Mounted, to be on the lookout for a Norseman plane which was flying in a scientist, Dr. James Paton. Martin had sent the message through by an Indian youth.

Since then, Tuk had been constantly on the alert. He had heard a plane's motor and had hurried along to Elk Lake, to the southwest, where Paton's plane should have landed. But to Tuk's amazement, the plane had not gone near that lake. Instead, it had circled to make a landing on a smaller lake, Mule Deer Lake, to the northeast.

Feeling that Paton's pilot had made some miscalculation, Tuk had hurried up to investigate, but he had heard the plane take off again before he reached the spot. It had vanished to the southeast—bound for the Outside.

He could not understand this. These malamute hybrid sled dogs which Olak and his kindred now attacked, were a sign that someone had come in by plane, someone who intended to stay. And Dr. Paton had not intended to stay long.

Tuk watched one of Olak's young wolves go down, both hamstrings cut, but shortly a badly slashed quartette of snarling half-wolves retreated before the swiftly striking adult wolves, Olak and Sanyek.

Clacking his teeth with his tongue, Tuk went on toward Mule Deer Lake.

As he moved into a belt of spruce timber fringing the northeasterly shore of the lake, Tuk trod with great caution. Now he glimpsed the new camp, and then a dark, swarthy man creature belaboring the bleeding dogs which he secured to a heavy log, together with three others, by chains.

"Eskimo half-breed," Tuk told himself, in identifying this dog handler. But then two white men strode up, to seat themselves against heavy packing cases.

WHEN seated comfortably, the bigger of the two produced a bottle and poured drinks. They began to talk with a heavy accent. The smaller man turned to his companion, a queer smile curling his lips.

"Your plans are all drawn up, *Herr* Kolzig?" he asked, "You haf told me little."

"*Ja,* we come here as prospectors for gold, Miller," the other man, who was evidently the leader of this party, replied. "It is likely you and Henri will do some trapping when our camp is built. It is strange that we arrive here before the Doctor Paton. I—"

"*Ou-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u—*"

The speaker was cut short by the long wail of the White Phantom. For the moment, Tuk Cramer thought the sharp eyes of this man Kolzig had seen him. Then Tuk glimpsed the dog handler, Henri, who, at the ringing cry of Olak, had swung sharply from the dogs, his lower jaw sagging, as if in alarm.

"What is that, Henri?" Kolzig asked huskily.

"*Ayah*! Dat beeg spirit wolf—d'wan which cut up my dogs."

"You seem afraid, *Herr* Kolzig," the man called Miller said. "Surely wolves do not frighten you. You have—"

"Stop Miller! *Lieber Gott*! What if I do dislike wolves! But you heard what Henri said? A *spirit* wolf."

Miller laughed thickly. Kolzig reached for the liquor bottle and poured another, bigger drink for himself. His hand shook, which pleased Tuk Cramer. Already, the cry of the great White Phantom had stabbed this big man's heart with fear!

The men resumed their talk. It was a talk that startled Cramer, for they spoke of Paton, and the doctor's "plans."

Instantly Tuk realized that Kolzig and his companions were here at the Valley of Forgotten Men for some grim purpose which would threaten the well-being of Dr. Paton. Lacking full understanding, Tuk shrugged and backed quietly away.

Two days later, a Norseman's motor and feathered prop startled Tuk as he watched from a seat close to the high northeast bank of Elk Lake. His instructions were to signal the pilot with a white cloth attached to a stick. He waved this flag now and was pleased when he saw the aircraft's wings waggle in recognition. Tuk held the flag high and steady as a wind direction indicator.

The Norseman swung to eastward to turn and come in for an up-wind landing. Tuk's mouth opened wide with admiration and amazement as he watched the plane's floats touch water with the grace of some huge Canada goose.

Like a squat Gargantuan water beetle the trim, blunt-nosed ship taxied to the near shore, and in a few moments, Tuk Cramer was shaking hands with Dr. Paton, a tall, broad-shouldered man whose hair was silvering at the temples. The doctor introduced Tuk to his grinning pilot, a red-headed man

of about Tuk's age whom he called Jerry Nolan, and whom Tuk liked instantly.

Tuk withheld his information on the party he had discovered at the other lake. There was much work to do, unloading the plane. Tuk and Tan had erected a small cabin for Paton as soon as they had received word from their friend, Corporal Martin.

With a pair of borrowed hip boots, Tuk assisted the new arrivals in unloading the plane. Supplies were carried up to the clearing in the poplar thicket in which the cabin had been erected.

"Better rig up the stove, Jerry," Paton directed pleasantly. "I'm so hungry I could eat a wolf."

Tuk started. Because of Olak, the White Phantom, the wolves of this range were more or less sacred to him and his kinfolk.

Tuk enjoyed the food Jerry Nolan warmed up. There was fresh bread in from the Outside, also butter which came in cans, and warmed beef stew. *Ayaie,* the butter! Tuk could not remember how long ago it had been since last he tasted butter.

When supper was finished, Dr. Paton lit his pipe and lay back on a small elkhide-covered bunk.

"I suppose you are wondering just why we come down north to your valley, Cramer?" he asked, and he spoke in French, which language Tuk preferred for conversation.

"*Oui, M'sieu le Docteur,* although *Caporal* Martin sent in papers from the Outside, which Lal read to us."

"Good, then you know something about the war's close—the use of the atomic bomb, and the source of its energy?"

"*Oui, m'sieu,* but not much. I know of the mineral at the Great Bear Lake. But what is that to do with this valley, the range of Olak, the White Phantom?"

"White— Oh yes, the big albino wolf Martin told us about. Well, this might sound strange to you, Cramer, but I came here in quest of death. No, don't be alarmed. I could mean death to disease. Let us hope whatever I might find will be used only for such humane purposes. Those gold oré samplings you sent in contained a metal showing which, we suspect, might be a— Well, I think you understand why I am here."

TUK nodded. He was about to speak, when the long piercing wail of Olak cut him off. Dr. Paton and Nolan started sharply, the doctor turning to Tuk, whose mouth corners were twisted in a smile.

"Olak, the Great White One, *M'sieu le Docteur!*" Tuk said. "He is still on guard against the malamutes which come with the man creatures a few days ago to—to Mule Deer Lake."

"What's this, Cramer?" Dr. Paton swung his legs over the side of the bunk. His brow was furrowed in a sharp frown. "You say another party landed at this—this Mule Deer Lake?"

"Told you I thought I observed a Norseman as we cut through that haze, before we were forced to land, sir," Jerry Nolan cut in.

"You saw this other party at the Lake, Cramer?" the doctor asked. "What were they like? Hear them discuss anything?"

"Three men, *m'sieu.* I heard them talk. They talk of you, your—plans."

Dr. Paton got to his feet. He paced back and forth a long moment, then suddenly halted and swung to face Jerry Nolan and Tuk.

"Well, I should not be surprised," he said. "International crooks, I should say—jackals ready to pounce on anything new in connection with atomic energy. They likely hope to jump us and get my secret formula for analysis. From now on, we shall have to keep a sharp lookout. Please report anything you may learn to me at once, Cramer. Understand?"

"*Oui, m'sieu.*"

Tuk got to his feet. Jerry Nolan was smiling, as though the suggestion of pending adventure pleased him.

"Good."

The doctor reached in a pocket and extracted a wallet. He offered some money to Tuk, but Tuk shook his head.

"*Non, m'sieu. Caporal* Martin is our good friend. I do this for him, because he ask me to help you. I—well, *m'sieu,* perhaps just one can of that butter for my wife and for Lal."

A few moments later, with three cans of butter tucked inside his buckskin shirt and a small seven-pound bag of white flour under his left arm, Tuk Cramer turned to head for home, promising to call soon to lend whatever aid he could.

"Good egg, Cramer," Jerry Nolan called after him. "Give my regards to your missus and to—to Lal."

When no more than four miles from the Paton camp, gliding through a willow thicket,

Tuk Cramer suddenly paused. He was possessed of a strange intuition, born of a lifetime in the hinterland. He froze, with the feeling that he was being followed.

Full darkness had almost descended upon the wilds. Tuk heard the short crack of a piece of dry windfall at his back. His hearing was keen. He slid to the right, moving with the silence and stealth of a cougar. Slowly he circled back, and at last fetched up in his own old tracks again.

He reentered the thicket and, reaching a small clearing, he halted as he glimpsed the back of Henri, the Eskimo half-breed. The man had been scouting the camp of the new arrivals. *Ayaie!* This creature was a menace.

Tuk was impelled to snuff out the menace here and now. *Ayaie!* He had to think of his kinfolk at the cabin. There were Netan and Lal especially. One shot, and this dog handler would be killed and no one need ever know of the site of his death.

It was the sudden mournful wailing of dogs in the distance which changed Tuk's mind. That, and the ringing counter challenge of the White Phantom from a rise of land near his lair.

Olak called again, and Tuk's mind became charged with understanding. Olak was calling to his son, Sa.

As if frightened by the wolf cries Henri, the half-breed Eskimo, uttered a strange throat sound and lunged from view, and Tuk was glad. He was glad he had not shot the man down, for he disliked having to kill a man unless in a circumstance of self-defense.

The White Phantom seemed to have a great influence for good.

By a wide circuitous route, Tuk at last reached his cabin where Netan and the young folk waited for his coming.

Tuk forced a smile for them. He handed the flour to Netan and placed the butter cans on the table. Although he had already eaten supper, they would feast again—on fresh bannock with butter, and venison steaks, for Tan had two days ago killed a young buck.

NETAN was wise. She could read trouble in Tuk's mind in spite of his forced banter and good humor. When the young folk had retired to their respective sleeping quarters, she turned to Tuk, her lovely, wide sloe eyes smoldering with curiosity.

Tuk told her of the sinister influence at Mule Deer Lake. He attempted to interpret for her the word Paton had given as to his mission here.

"We must, all of us, watch, Netan," he urged. "But have courage, for Olak, the White One, watches, too. And the leader of the man creatures at Mule Deer Lake is afraid of wolves. *Ayaie!* Soon the snows come, perhaps before morning. Sa will come with the pack, and if those malamutes again break out—" Tuk broke off, shuddering. "Olak and his kindred will not rest until death has splashed the snow with blood."

Tuk and Netan conversed softly in the Cree Indian language. Now both were silent, as a northeasterly wind commenced a dirge in the tamaracs. It was the first whistling breath of winter!

During the next two weeks, blizzard snows and fiercely whooping cold struck the range, shutting in Tuk Cramer. On the first evening of clear weather, Jerry Nolan snowshoed over to visit at the cabin by the springs. He brought gifts of cholocate, and some cloth for Netan and Lal.

He took delight in teasing young Tan by pretending to make love to Lal. Tan's eyes flamed sharply as he watched this red-headed one draw a seat close to the laughing Lal, running a hand through her glorious hair so that it cascaded in the lamplight like flowing, spun gold.

Tuk nudged Netan secretly. Netan smiled, yet her chest rose and fell with much sympathy for Tan. He had rescued Lal from the hands of the Cliff Dweller Indians many seasons ago. He loved the girl intensely, albeit he knew that he could never marry her.

Besides, Netan knew that Jerry Nolan had a lovely young wife back in civilization, with two small girl children—twins. Jerry had shown their pictures to Tuk.

Jerry broke into contagious laughter. He patted Tan's shoulders and took the pictures of his family from his wallet. Tan was at once changed. Jerry told him the stories of his part in the war, as a fighter pilot. He showed him a wide scar which ran almost the entire length of his right upper arm—the mark of a German fighter pilot's bullet.

"But I got the blighter, Tan. I sent him and his Messerschmitt hissing into the Channel."

Suddenly Jerry's eyes narrowed as he buttoned up the cuff of his shirt sleeve. He turned sharply to Tuk.

"Holy smoke, Tuk," he clipped. "I'd forgotten about the chief! I must go. He's alone

at the cabin, and is often pretty absent-minded."

"Den I go wit' you," Tuk grunted, in broken English.

"No need for that, chum." Jerry patted a holster which contained a nine millimeter Belgian automatic. "Little Betsy'll take care of everything."

But Tuk insisted. He reached down his Winchester and parka. Together they moved out into the clear, frosty night.

Sweeping Northern Lights shuddered across the sky as Tuk led the way back to Elk Lake, but all at once he paused. He dropped to a knee and beckoned to Nolan.

"Dese track are Eskimo snowshoe," he grunted. "*Ayaie!* D'man, Henri, 'as been makin' visit. We must 'urry now!"

Their snowshoes kicked up sharp white spume as they hurried along, but when near the cabin, Tuk halted again.

"No light, Jerry. *M'sieu le Docteur* would have left a lamp burn' for you. Watch close. I see plenty more Henri track!"

Tuk pointed to tracks which followed the path to the Paton supplies tent.

"My great gosh, Tuk!" Jerry exploded. "Our samplings were in that tent! Something's happened! Come on!"

They rushed to the tent into which Jerry flashed an electric torch. He stepped back, making a deep throat sound.

"The two bags have gone, Tuk. The chief'll be crazy!"

He whirled and raced to the cabin, flinging open the door, with Tuk right on his heels. As he flashed on his light, a sharp cry escaped Nolan. Dr. Paton lay sprawled across his bunk, blood trickling down his forehead.

"Quick, Tuk! Touch a light to that lamp on the table and stir up the heater fire. We'll need hot water."

Nolan fished a flask of brandy from a small medical case.

DR. PATON came to, spluttering as the brandy gagged him. He blinked owlishly up as he recovered his breath.

"It's Nolan, sir," Jerry called. "What in all creation happened here?"

Paton groaned, and placed a hand to his head.

"I—another touch of brandy now, Jerry," he mumbled. "Thanks. I—was a bit careless. Went to make a test of the samplings and became too absorbed. Of course, I wasn't thinking of the possibility of a personal attack on me. I rather thought, if anything, that those folk at Mule Deer Lake would like to have me alive, on the hoof, as it were. Because, dead, my formula of analysis can be of no use to them. I heard a sound, but wasn't quick enough. Next thing I knew, I was struck sharply from behind and—well, here I am."

He broke off, breathing heavily, then suddenly he sat up, his eyes starting hard at Nolan.

"The samplings, Jerry! Great heavens! I almost forgot!"

"Sorry, sir. The samplings are gone!"

"Oh!" Paton seemed to sag.

Tug Cramer felt guilty. He had had an opportunity to kill the swarthy Eskimo half-breed and had passed up the opportunity. Now, *ayaie!* an important theft had been made.

"Reckon that's the pay-off, Doctor," Jerry Nolan said. "I'd better get Lizzie jacked up and her skis on. The police will have to get a report right away, eh?"

Paton nodded acquiescence.

"Most unfortunate," he said mournfully. "We'd have difficulty replacing those grab samplings now. Not that the samplings will help those creatures at the other lake, but it will tip them off to my discovery. Our greatest problem is that I shall be held up in my analysis until—until we can dig out some more. Well, what is, is! You will come to help Jerry with the plane in the morning, Tuk?"

The doctor turned to Tuk, smiling softly, as if to reassure him.

"*Oui, M'sieu le Docteur.* I come. *Caporal* Dan Martin will be mad I not kill that *sal bête* Henri! *Ayaie!*"

Tuk jerked up the hood of his parka and slipped his hands into his mittens. He must leave.

As he stepped out of doors, his mind became electrified with a sudden desire to do something more worthwhile in the interests of Dr. Paton. Tomorrow morning, before he joined Nolan at the plane, he would take a trip to the northeast and scout out the Mule Deer Lake party.

It was the sudden shrill cry of Olak that changed his mind for him. That long, fierce cry had been a definite call to Sa and the pack!

Tuk turned and struck a draw which would lead him to the camp of the raiders at Mule

Deer Lake. As he neared the lair zone of Olak, Tuk was brought up sharply by the sounds of battle issuing from a nearby muskeg now well frozen over and snow-covered.

Tuk slid along to this clearing where a sharp clash of fangs was in progress. He watched one of Olak's young wolves kicking in death. With great pride and admiration he watched Olak and Sanyek hurl themselves into battle against odds. The last of their young, a handsome dog wolf, fought valiantly just off Olak's right flank.

Tuk wiped sweat from his forehead, his breathing sharp, like puffed jets of steam. He dared not shoot, for the handler of these savage malamutes seemed always on the prowl.

One of the big creatures was now down, Olak worrying his throat. At last, the remainder of the dogs whirled and cut for cover. The domestic dog blood in their veins could not stand more of the savagery of attack of the White Phantom wolf king and his kindred.

Alert now, Tuk moved on toward the lake camp.

A light glowed through a tent's canvas. As Tuk silently approached, he heard sharp voices, in heated discussion. He pressed himself close to the shaded side of the walled tent. He heard Miller's voice.

"You're drunk again, *Herr* Kolzig," the man charged. "Drunk and afraid of the white wolf and his kindred. *Ach!* Why did you let loose the dogs of Henri? He will not like that, and you know we can never fully trust him! Fool that he was, he struck the doctor, might have killed him, then what good to us would these samplings be? Without the formula of his secret analysis?"

"Quiet, *verfluchte kerl!*" Kolzig boomed thickly. "I direct this party. Have I not sent Henri back to destroy the plane of Dr. Paton? Think I am a fool, to allow them the chance of getting word to the police? Soon, very soon, we call on the doctor and demand his formula, and then, *mein freund,* we go. It will be convenient to dispose of Henri before we leave. We—"

HIGH-PITCHED, the wail of a wild wolf cut the big man short.

"Sa!" Tuk told himself with enthusiasm. "*Ayaie!* Now the White One will be most happy!"

"That wolf call, Miller!" Kolzig croaked huskily. "It is not the same! I tell you I can not much longer stand the howls of these creatures. They are different, devilish!"

Tuk watched the big man's shadow go through the motions of pouring more whisky into a heavy glass. Tuk smiled. It was well. But Tuk had heard the big man speak of Henri and the plane, of Dr. Paton. *Ayah!* That was bad.

He backed cautiously away and soon was scuffing snow on his way to his cabin. He must first see Netan, and then mush on to warn Paton and Nolan.

As he snowshoed on, Tuk was glad that Sa was in. It always gave him a greater courage here in the grim valley when trouble threatened to know that Olak, Sa and the pack were grouped for action.

He thought, too, of Kolzig's fear of the wild wolf creatures, which made him drink too much whisky. Such drinking would warp his better judgment. Such men made mistakes which were costly at times.

On seemingly tireless legs, Tuk increased his pace and shortly fetched up at his cabin. He feared for his kinfolk, with Henri on the prowl.

First he drank a bowl of hot broth, then cautioned Netan, Tan and Lal to be ever on the alert.

"You, Netan, who shoot as well as a man, will take Tan's old rifle and be ready, while you, Brave One—" he turned to Tan—"will watch closely. I go to help at the lake. Mebbeso I am already too late. Lal, you will help keep watch."

There were no sentimental or emotional farewells as Tuk made ready to leave. Netan's lovely eyes widened, and her breathing rose and fell sharply, but she made no other sign of the deep concern she held for her husband.

When Tuk was gone, she reached Tan's old Winchester down from its antler rack, jerking its lever action. Then she turned to Lal, smiling softly.

"You will go to bed, Little Flower," she said gently. "I will wake you later, so that Tan may sleep."

Lal nodded. There was never any dispute at the cabin of Tuk Cramer. . . .

A bright flare greeted Tuk as he neared the shore of Elk Lake. It brought him up sharply, every nerve fibre tense—tense with misgiving, and with a smoldering hatred for the man creature Henri, the Eskimo half-breed.

Ayaie! The plane was destroyed beyond all possibility of immediate repair. Jerry Nolan would take this badly.

Tuk swung, but moved with great caution, for he glimpsed the fresh tracks of Henri leading in again on the supplies tents. As he neared the thicket fringing the doctor's cabin, Tuk paused. He had heard the crunch of snow ahead. Henri was evidently on a private plundering mission.

"Henri!"

The name slid through Tuk's firmed lips as he glimpsed the Eskimo man creature about to enter the first of the tents.

Tuk moved on, scarcely making a sound the night wind didn't cover. When within five feet of the tent, he laid his rifle gently against the bole of a poplar and slid his hunting knife around his belt to a position of readiness.

He poised himself. Henri was half-in, half-out the tent, lifting his leg over the two-foot wall, when suddenly Tuk sprang. He landed heavily, crashing Henri hard to the pile of equipment just inside.

The squat man grunted, as if winded.

"*Mucha* Satan!" Tuk snarled. "I kill you this time, evil one!"

But Tuk had struck a hellcat in Henri. The man whirled suddenly and, as he rolled, he struck sharply up with his head, catching Tuk full in the mouth and nose.

Momentarily blinded by pain, Tuk was off guard. The breed managed to get a knee free and crash it solidly to Tuk's stomach.

Stifling a groan of pain, Tuk hung fast a moment, while his senses reeled. This gave the breed a moment in which to snake a hand down to the walrus-ivory-handled knife in his belt.

But Tuk recovered. With a savage snarl he leaped backward to his feet and drew his own knife. Now, there would be no quarter! The savage Indian blood in Tuk's veins impelled him to a frenzy of action. He had raised his knife hand, ready to strike down with all his force, when suddenly the Eskimo breed's knife hand jerked upward. He sent the keen blade lancing through space.

TUK stepped back, but the blade caught him a glancing slash across the knuckles, causing him to drop his own knife. And before he could fully recover, the other man had bounded to his feet, coming in head down, like a frenzied muskox bull.

Tuk whirled and swung a looping left hand with balled fist flush to the half-breed's mouth, splitting those blubberlike lips.

Then, for the next ten minutes, Tuk Cramer forgot all his promises to Corporal Dan Martin. He had recovered sufficiently from the blows to retrieve all his old-time fighting savagery—a savagery which, in former days, had come to him when he drank liquor and fell foul of the police.

Today he was sober. He had not touched liquor in many years. He was in perfect condition and went into action, employing all the tactics of the French-Canadian rivermen with whom he had worked two seasons in the river drives along the Peace and Athabasca Rivers.

He crashed blow after blow into the heavy face of his opponent. He drove smashing head butts to the man's jaw. He jabbed him heavily in eyes and throat with his thumbs, and then, uttering an animal-like snarl, he put all his force into a terrific left-hand smash to the face.

Henri tottered back. His legs were caught behind the knees by the tent wall. He crashed heavily into a pile of equipment and, as he fell, his outstretched right hand contacted the haft of a prospector's pick.

Tuk Cramer took a moment out to shake the hair from his face, and to breath on his bleeding right hand. In that moment, Henri recovered, and firmed a grip on the pick handle.

Too late Tuk saw the man's head and arm jerk upward. He was sent reeling from a glancing blow in the left temple. The pick handle had come in whirling like a bolo.

Tuk pitched to his face in the snow.

Only a sudden fear in Henri's soul saved Tuk's life. Before the tall, dark man of the grim valley could recover, Henri had turned, to go plunging on to safety through the thicket.

Tuk Cramer swore bitterly as he shook his head to clear it. *Ayaie!* Twice he might easily have killed the dog handler. Twice he had failed to do so!

He clapped snow to his forehead and temples, which brought him relief. He was still perturbed. Because of an old promise to Dan Martin, his friend the corporal, to preserve peaceful habits, he had failed when he might have done Dr. Paton and Jerry Nolan a great service. Now, all those terrible man creatures at Mule Deer Lake were free!

Ayah! Tuk spat upon his own feet.

"You act like a squaw!" he tiraded.

But slowly a grim, mirthless smile gathered at his mouth corners. His bruised and cut right hand reminded him that he had dealt out a terrific battering to the raider.

Tuk moved on to the cabin and quickly roused its sleeping occupants.

While Dr. Paton attended to Tuk's medical aid requirements, Jerry Nolan hurried to the lake and back. He was a different Jerry now.

His favorite Norseman plane was damaged beyond all hope of immediate repair. This was his peacetime plane, as greatly cherished as had been his roaring Spitfire.

"Jiggered, sir!" he exploded. "What the devil goes on from here on?" His eyes blazed the query at Dr. Paton. "If, as Tuk warns, those guys, Kolzig and Miller, intend to attack us, do we just wait for them here?"

It was Tuk who gave answer to this. This Valley of Forgotten Men had brought him and his kinfolk far too much tragedy. He intended from now on to assert himself in defense of his rights.

"We should not let dem attack here," he clucked. "*Ayaie!* We follow on dis Henri's trail, Jer-ry, an' attack dem at Mule Deer Lake. I have my wife and d' oders to t'ink of."

Dr. Paton took over. Usually of calm mien, his eyes now flashed flame in the lamplight.

"I agree with Cramer, Jerry," he said. "Holy sailors! I come up here in peace, albeit in quest of death, and I don't calculate to allow that crooked outfit of Kolzig's to bushwhack me. Bushwhack, Jerry, in case you don't know, is an expression my American forebears used to denote killers who lay in wait."

JERRY chuckled. Here was a new fighting chief. But Paton was talking again.

"We are challenged not by a group of clever international spies who might have employed a more dignified technique," the doctor resumed, "but challenged by a bunch of fumbling international crooks, secondaries, who want something they will sell to the highest bidder. We shall be well within the law to—to pistolwhip them! Another expression of the old West, Jerry."

"Why—uh—you amaze me, chief," Jerry returned. "Let's go get 'em. Tuk can lead the way. Let's go!"

Jerry was loading fresh ammunition into the magazine of a .303 Savage as he talked. Tuk smiled with great pleasure. The time had come to rid the range of the killers of Mule Deer Lake!

As the three men approached the zone of Olak's lair, Tuk, in the lead, halted. In the still full flush of the multi-tinted display of the Northern Lights, he had glimpsed the gliding forms of the wolf pack, led grandiosely by Olak, the White Phantom, Sa, and Sanyek.

Tuk clutched at one of Paton's arms.

"*M'sieu le Docteur,*" he whispered huskily, "while there is light, take a good look. You might never see them together again—the White Phantom, his mate, and Sa, his great son. They go to meet the malamutes, to give battle to the death!"

The doctor gasped as in the sweeping brilliance of the Aurora he glimpsed the "spirit" wolf of which Martin had told him, lead his kindred to battle. The wolf trio now entered a small frozen swale.

"I would give a lot," Dr. Paton murmured, "if my old friend of the University Zoölogy Department were with me. He will never believe my story when I tell it."

Tuk moved on. His heart beat with triphammer tempo now, for intuitively he sensed that he and his companions were not far from action.

Dr. Paton had intimated when first Tuk met him, that he had come North in quest of death. Tuk was fully aware that now death might be lurking in each and every thicket.

He had been hurt tonight. He intended not to be caught off guard again!

All at once Tuk made a signal to his companions. They dropped to cover behind the crest of a hogback ridge. Slowly they crept up to Tuk's side.

The malamutes—six of them—howled dismally as they prepared to attack a pair of wolves gliding across a small swale below the watching men. Themselves charged with wild wolf blood, these hungry sled hybrids of Henri's suddenly charged.

Tuk Cramer gasped as he saw the sudden flirt of Olak's big form, and the sideward slash of the White Phantom's fangs as he laid open a dog-wolf creature from the division of its jaws to its ear.

Now, from all quarters, led by Sanyek, the pack lunged in to give battle.

The three men lay watching the bloody encounter, fascinated. Dr. Paton coughed brokenly as he saw the hamstrings of a monster hybrid cut. The beast sagged, only to feel the sharp grip of fangs at its throat.

Suddenly Tuk closed a grip on one of Paton's wrists.

"*Ayaie!*" he gasped. "They come—the man creatures! See! The big one leading is Kolzig!"

Four of the sled dogs were down before the men from Mule Deer Lake reached the swale's edge.

Paton started as he heard a voice boom:

"You're drunk, *Herr* Kolzig! Stop, you fool! Those creatures will tear you to pieces!"

Kolzig had a drawn revolver in his hand. Drunk with whisky and with fear, he staggered on down toward the swale, incapable of distinguishing between wild wolf and sled dog.

Again Miller called to him. Kolzig spun.

"You *Schwein*, Miller," he roared. "You have bothered me since the first day we struck this *verdammte* valley. Now—"

His voice was a half screech as he spun. Flame gushed from the muzzle of his gun. Miller spun, and pitched face downward in the snow.

The wolf pack whirled and leaped to cover, but Kolzig turned and, with revolver ready, moved in on the swamp.

A wounded malamute crept toward him. He gasped aloud.

Tuk Cramer had raised his rifle, easing back the hammer.

SUDDENLY the malamute lunged. Kolzig's revolver exploded. With a horrible howl, the hybrid wolf-dog leaped high, then flopped to the snow, to kick. Still one of Henri's dogs was left.

But Henri had seen. He came in fast, his rifle at the ready. He roared a call to Kolzig, but the crazed metal raider chuckled hysterically as he raised his gun to sight the struggling dog creature.

Crack! Kolzig did not get his shot away. He stumbled a few steps forward before folding at the middle and subsiding to the snow.

The Eskimo, now in a frenzy at having seen his sled dogs slain, shouted loud curses as he floundered down to again throw down on Kolzig. He jerked his rifle up to his shoulder, but Jerry Nolan beat him to the draw. A half-scream escaped the horrible man as he whirled and fell dead to the snow.

Dr. Paton wiped cold sweat from his face. He was quivering in every limb.

But slowly he regained his calm. The man, Kolzig, seemed still alive. Headed by the doctor, the small party moved in.

Paton dropped to a knee beside the prostrate man who might have killed him but for this new turn of events. In the brilliance of the sweeping Aurora, Paton made swift examination of Kolzig. He shook his head.

"Half the back of his head blown away," he intoned.

Kolzig stirred. His eyes opened and he stared blankly up.

"This is Paton, *Herr* Kolzig," Paton said. "You hear me?"

"*Ja—ja*, I hear. *Lieber Gott!* It was the —the wolves that brought about *mein* end! All my life—I have been afraid of—them. *Ach!* You are Paton, you say?"

"Yes. Sorry I won't be able to hand you over to the police. Do you wish to make any statement, Kolzig?"

"*Nein.*" The man's voice was scarcely audible now. "I—I never did trust Miller. He would haf killed me. Henri was as bad. I learned nothing from your samplings, *Herr* Doctor. But tell me—what did—you—learn?"

Paton shook his head.

"Not even to a dying or dead man would I divulge that secret, Kolzig."

At the sudden piercing cry of Olak, the White Phantom, Kolzig started. He attempted to rise, fear-filled eyes wide, mouth agape. Suddenly a rattle issued from his throat as he fell back, dead. The cry of the White Phantom had hastened his end.

Shortly, Tuk Cramer led his companions back toward his cabin. They had decided to return at daylight and bury the dead men.

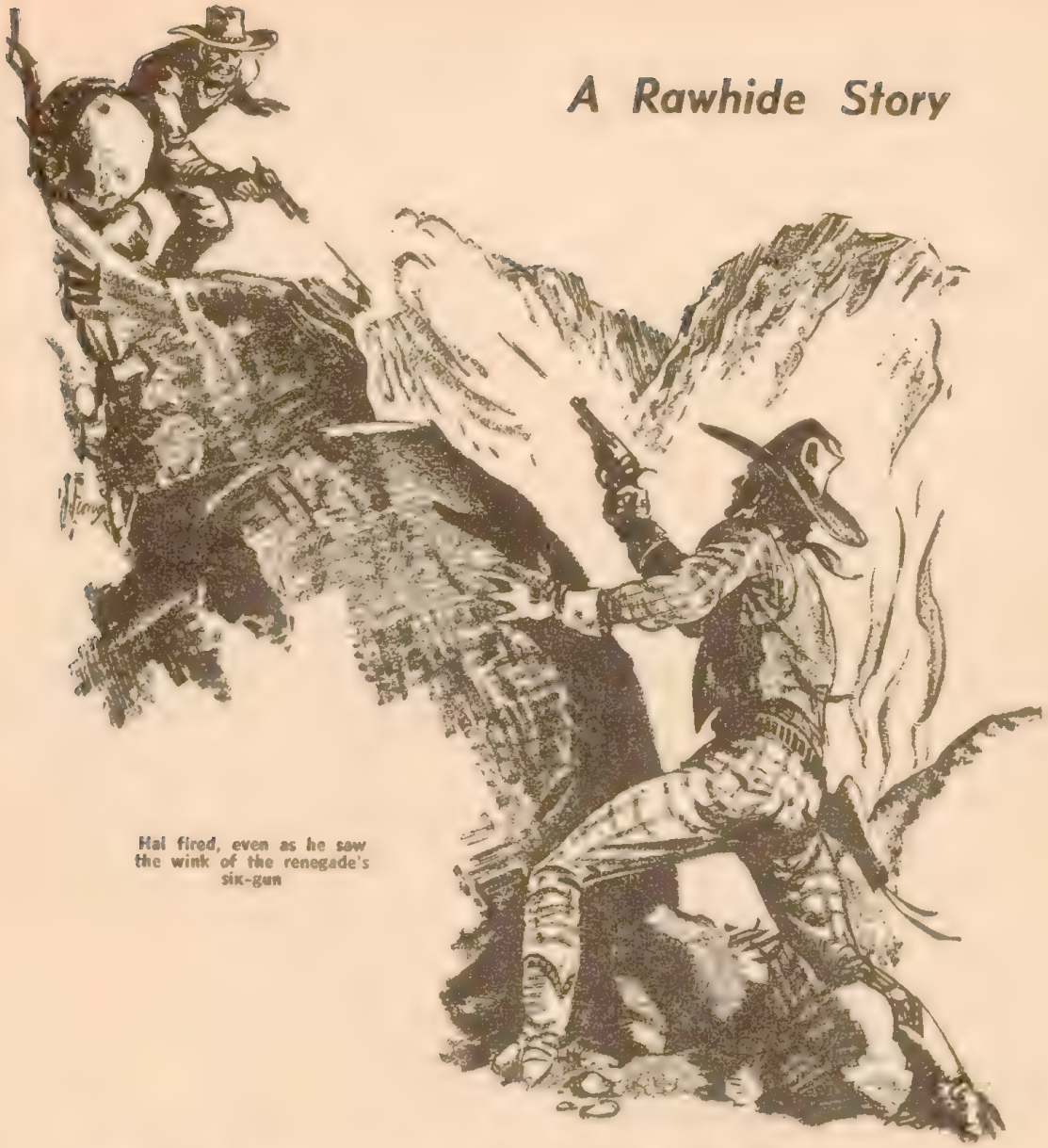
A soft chuckle escaped Paton as he snowshoed on in Tuk's trail. He could have told Kolzig that he had discovered a new source of death in very truth—a source of death to disease. His findings so far would be more fully analyzed, but if his calculations were correct, confirmed, he would give his secret only to the Council for Cancer Research.

The Northern Lights winked themselves out, and peace lay across the Valley of Forgotten Men as Tuk and his companions came into the clearing near his cabins.

At their backs, beyond the dismal tamarac swamp, Olak, the White Phantom, and his kindred licked their wounds—the price of victory.

Next Month's Novel: THE RIDERS OF CARNE COVE, by Wayne D. Overholser

A Rawhide Story



Hal fired, even as he saw the wink of the renegade's six-gun

THE DIE-HARD

By TOM PARSONS

Bounty hunter Hal Bide wasn't too popular in town, but he redeemed himself when it came to a blazing showdown!

HAL BIDE moved carefully along the chain of big yellow boulders that dipped into the little pocket. The jagged peaks of the War Bonnets towered high above him, looking impassively down on this grim finale to a long and desperate chase. Hal's blue eyes were narrowed in his tanned and pointed face. His strong fingers gripped the pearl-handled Colt and the hammer was dogged back.

He could see the thin line of blue smoke above the farthest rock, "Lobo" Lawson's

campfire, symbolizing two thousand cold dollars in rewards if Hal was quick enough with his gun. He had entire confidence in himself as he edged forward, flattening himself against the sandstone rock. His lips were firmly pressed and his face, made tight by his inner tenseness, seemed all flat angles, not exactly handsome now.

He paused, ears straining. He heard nothing, and cautiously left the shelter of the rock and moved on to the next. Lobo Lawson's bounty would be the fifth he had collected in two years. Lobo had been one of the band of killing train robbers under Arnold Gaegen who had terrorized Montana.

Hal's eyes lighted when he thought of the five thousand that lay on Gaegen's head. With Lobo killed or captured, and the reward paid for him, Hal would start after Gaegen.

He moved around a great bulge of the boulder, Colt leveled. As he inched forward, he could see the switching tail of Lobo's cayuse, could catch the sharp odor of coffee. Hal smiled grimly. This would be an easy job.

He would catch Lobo off guard and take him prisoner with no gunplay.

At that instant he heard a slight sound, a pebble rolling for a short distance down a slope. He spun around, crouching. He caught a brief glimpse of a squat figure lined against the sky above him, and knew that Lobo had played his own trick.

Hal's Colt jumped up and he fired even as he saw the evil wink of the renegade's six. A giant fist mauled Hal back against the rock and he felt his strength pour out of him. He bit his lips, fighting for control, hanging grimly onto the Colt that now seemed to weigh tons.

Lobo had jerked erect as Hal's bullet struck him. He stood swaying atop the rock and Hal painfully leveled his six. He squeezed the trigger, saw Lobo jerk and crumple. The man fell limply, hung for a moment on the bulge of the boulder, then slid over the side. He fell a matter of ten yards to the talus slope below the boulder and slid limply a few feet. He never moved.

Hal Bide remained plastered to the rock, fighting the waves of nausea that swept over him. His gun slipped from his nerveless fingers and his knees buckled. He caught himself by sheer will-power, then couldn't hold out any longer.

He felt himself falling as blackness engulfed him. . . .

IT WAS late afternoon when his eyes blinked open again. His side felt as if every rib had been smashed, and his breathing was a painful effort. He first saw Lobo Lawson, still silently sprawled at the edge of the talus. His mind dully dwelt on the two thousand reward for a moment, then Hal realized he might not live to collect this bounty.

Wounded, he had to get himself out of this War Bonnet wilderness. Rawhide lay a few miles south at the foot of the range. If he could make that town he would be all right.

He grimly pulled himself up, pain tearing at his side like an eagle's talons. He half-crawled, half-dragged himself on around the boulder and to Lobo Lawson's camp. The picketed horse eyed him, ears pricking forward. The fire had gone out and the coffee pot and skillet sat on cold, black ashes.

Lobo's bedroll and saddle lay to one side. Hal reached the bedroll and his strength gave out. He lay for a long time without moving, breath labored. At last he felt better and stronger.

By sundown, he had examined the hole in his side and painfully cleaned off the dried and caked blood. He was certain the slug had fractured one of the ribs. As best he could, he bandaged it, shredding his shirt for the job. He managed a fire and reheated the coffee, broke out some of Lobo's hardtack and bacon.

He rolled up in Lobo's bedroll and sleep instantly rolled over him like an exhausting wave.

It was morning before he awakened again. He felt stronger. He moved staggeringly away from the camp, edging from rock to rock, until he reached his own saddled mount, staked out where he had left it. He worked himself into saddle, clung weakly to the horn. Heading the horse down slope toward Rawhide, he used his spurs to urge it forward, then let the animal have its head.

The seven miles of twisting mountain trail seemed to last for an eternity. Half the time Hal was out of his head, but his strong fingers clung to the saddlehorn. He was only dimly aware that his horse had found a road and followed it down to the level valley.

He sensed, rather than knew, that there were houses around him, that his horse had stopped, its nose against a hitch-rail. Vaguely he heard voices, then he slid sideward out of saddle. Surprisingly, he didn't strike hard ground, and his mind cleared for a moment.

"Lobo Lawson," he said. "Up beyond Dog Leg in a rock pocket. I got him. Trailed—reward's mine. Hal Bide never misses."

His tongue became thick and he blanked out. . . .

It seemed only a moment when he opened his eyes again, but everything was puzzling. He no longer wore his clothes, and he was not in a saddle. He lay comfortably in bed in a sunny room, a soft pillow under his head. He blinked at the light streaming in the window and experimentally moved his legs. Instantly a girl bent over him, her dark eyes soft and inquiring, a friendly smile on her red lips.

"Well, you decided to stay around awhile! How do you feel?"

Hal stared at her until she flushed, and her lashes lowered. He licked his lips, found them dry as if he had fever. His voice sounded surprisingly weak.

"I'm all right."

He turned his head and looked around the room. A door opened on a short hall, a table had bottles of medicine on it. The room had been a man's, Hal could see that. His eyes returned to the girl.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Where am I?"

"This is Breck Long's home, in Rawhide. He's the town marshal. Doc Renford thought for awhile you wouldn't recover. You'd lost so much blood and were so exhausted that an ordinary man would have died."

"You?" Hal asked.

She smiled again. "I'm Tess Martin. Mother and I live across from the schoolhouse. I come to take care of you while Breck Long is at work. He takes over the chore at night."

Hal sighed contentedly and his eyes grew heavy. He slept again.

When he awoke, the lamp was lit and a man sat by the medicine-filled table. He looked up as Hal moved, gray eyes sharp and alert. He had broad shoulders and an almost catlike way of moving. A star glittered on his broad chest. He had a long nose, and harsh lips that were softened now with a smile.

"Yuh're Breck Long," Hal said drowsily. "She told me."

"That's right." Breck laughed. "I been waitin' for yuh to wake up so's I could bring yuh something to eat. Hang and rattle. I'll be right back."

He returned shortly with a steaming bowl of soup. He helped Hal sit up, and his powerful hands were surprisingly gentle. Breck sat in the chair, shrewdly watching Hal as he ate. He cleared his throat.

"We found Lobo Lawson. Buried him in Boot-hill. I reported his killin' to the gents that offered the reward, namin' you. The dinero should be along pretty soon. Quite a heap of it."

"Shore," Hal answered. "I earned it, too. Did a long job of trailin'."

"Lobo was with Arnold Gaegen," Breck said. "Reckon he's in these parts?"

"Don't know. I figger that gang split up to hide. Soon as I'm on my feet, I'm goin' to find Gaegen. He's worth five thousand dollars, dead or alive."

Breck's eyes dropped. "What's yore business, Bide?"

"Bounty hunter," Hal answered.

HE LOOKED sharply at Breck. The marshal stared down at his polished boots, and Hal's lips twisted slightly.

"Don't yuh like the sound of it? It's gents like me that keep the hunted men on the jump. It's a good payin' job. How long would a puncher have to work to clear the two thousand I did on Lobo Lawson?"

"I don't argue none," said Breck. "Me, I wouldn't be a bounty hunter, but that's my own way of lookin' at it. If yuh're proud of the job there ain't no need of makin' excuses. Here, I'll take that empty bowl. Want more?"

Neither man brought up the subject again and Hal sank into an uneasy silence. He knew how most people regarded the professional man-hunter. Without a badge or authority, Hal Bide and men of his kind took to the danger trails. They pitted their wits and courage against the deadly cunning of renegades, murderers and dangerous robbers.

Hal had never considered the job from any angle but that of the rewards to be paid. He had killed three men now in the last few years, turned in half a dozen others, some wounded, others with a whole skin. It was all in the day's work.

During the days that followed, Breck Long never mentioned bounty hunting again. He treated Hal Bide with an easy hospitality, but Hal thought he detected a note of reserve in the man.

But Tess Martin was different. Hal, at first, liked to lie quietly and watch her move around the room, his eyes half-closed, his thoughts lazy and pleasant. The more he saw her, the more beautiful she became, and he

began to find the nights eternities long until she came again the next morning.

When he could at last sit up, bolstered by several pillows, he started to talk to her. Time and again he would catch a soft light in her dark eyes as she looked at him. But her glance would quickly shift or lower.

He learned that she and her mother lived alone. Her father, now dead, had been a cattleman in the area, and the two women lived comfortably on the proceeds of the sale of his ranch.

Hal started to talk about himself to Tess. He mentioned his boyhood home in Wyoming and his parents, dead now and gone. His father had never been more than a puncher, and Hal himself had taken to the saddle at an early age. His whole life had changed when a friend of his had, through sheer luck, dabbed his lariat around a wanted rustler.

"I saw the dinero he got and learned there was a heap of other bad men worth money," Hal said, with a smile. "Since then I been chasin' 'em."

"You must be very lucky," Tess said. "You'll be able to set yourself up in the cattle business in a short time. Many men work a whole life time and never get the chance."

"What makes yuh think I will?" Hal asked.

"But all these rewards—" she started, and Hal laughed.

"I've got mebbe fifty dollars now besides the Lawson money that's comin?"

She looked shocked and Hal read a faint disappointment in her eyes.

"I do a heap of travelin' and I spend more'n I should. Yuh can always drop into a poker game while yuh're trailin' around. I never could stay much in one place. Reckon I never will."

"I see," she said, her voice low.

She smiled and changed the subject but Hal detected a new and disturbing reserve in the girl. He tried to break through it, but never quite succeeded.

The days passed and he had more talks with her. But always he would find himself describing the places he had seen, the long journeys he had taken, and he would detect the faint cloud in her eyes. He would stop, puzzled and somehow worried.

It slowly dawned on him that his boasting erected a barrier between them, when he had hoped it might make him seem a slightly better figure of a man. In time he stopped talking altogether about his travels, his job. They discussed Rawhide and the valley, and Hal learned a great deal of the place without having more than glimpsed it.

Tess was in the room the morning Breck Long and a stranger came in. Doc Renford had just finished examining Hal's wound and he straightened as the marshal entered. Doc jerked his thumb toward Hal.

"In a week he'll be on his feet, sitting out in that sunshine. It won't be long then until he's fully recovered."

"Glad to hear it," Breck boomed heartily. He turned to Hal and pulled the stranger up to the bed. "This is Paul Pace. He's cashier of our bank. Yore reward draft has done come through."

Pace shook hands briefly. He was a quiet, mild man with a steely glint in his eyes, and an open smile.

"I can give you the cash, the draft, or deposit it, however you want," he said.

HE EXTENDED a green bank draft and Hal's eyes lighted when he saw the bold pen strokes that spelled two thousand dollars. He grinned widely and held it up toward Tess.

"Now there's a pay-check. It's a heap better'n puncher's wages. Wait until I track down Arnold Gaegen—and I shore aim to get after him as soon as I'm up."

"It's—very nice," Tess said quietly, turned and walked swiftly out of the room. Hal felt a little foolish, still holding the check extended. He looked blankly at Breck Long.

"Now what yuh reckon was wrong with her?"

"I deal with money, Mr. Bide," Pace said quietly, "but I learned long ago that the man who thinks it means everything is badly mistaken. How about that draft?"

"Deposit it," Hal answered shortly, and gave him the paper.

Pace gave him a long, searching glance and a swift smile before he left. Hal stopped Breck as the marshal started out the door. At his signal, Breck returned to the bed. Hal's voice lowered.

"Is Tess—sort of sweet on anybody in town?"

"Tess?" Breck said in surprise. He shrugged his wide shoulders. "Shucks, I don't know. I reckon she has beaus, right enough. But I never heard of nobody steady. Say, yuh ain't aiming—"

"Might," Hal broke in. "She's a mighty nice girl, Breck."

The marshal straightened and stared down

at Hal, his hands on his hips. His eyes were suddenly cold and his lips thinned for a moment.

"She *is* a mighty fine girl. She deserves more'n a ramblin' bounty hunter. Yuh can figger that one out, while yuh're gettin' better."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Hal's face turned white in anger. He started a hot retort, but his lips clamped shut.

Hal Bide's recovery was fairly swift once the crisis was past. Almost miraculously his strong body had started to heal the harm done to it by Lobo's bullet. Doc Renford's medicine and Tess Martin's care completed the work, and before long Hal could move slowly around Breck Long's house.

Then Tess Martin left and he was alone most of the day. He would sit on the vine-shaded porch, watching the quiet rhythm of Rawhide's life. It was peaceful, friendly, and rich, and Hal began to question his own attitudes. But that didn't last long. As his body mended, he grew restless, and his thoughts turned to the long trails. Once he was able, he promised himself a long journey. He would go after Gaegen and the five thousand reward.

He mended, and yet he didn't leave Rawhide. He thanked Breck for his hospitality and moved into Mrs. Garver's rooming house. He loafed at Lem Adams' store or at Dent Sturgis' New Deck Saloon. He tried to start a big poker game there with his new reward as a stake, but Dent soon stopped it.

"There's a low limit here, Bide," he said flatly. "We play for fun, not for blood. Put up yore dinero."

So that release was denied to him. Hal chafed at the strange reluctance that held him tied to Rawhide. He did not want to leave Tess Martin. He had met other girls in his life but, before, he had always been able to ride off. Now, he couldn't. Tess was different, and he couldn't leave her.

He spent several evenings at her home, meeting Mrs. Martin. Tess was always friendly and charming, changing only when he would forget and lapse into talk of the long trails, or the amount of money he hoped to make from rewards in the next year or two. Then she would become silent and distant, often excusing herself.

It was after just such an incident that she turned Hal down for a dance at the schoolhouse. Hal had bowed silently, said an icy good night, and gone striding away down the dark road toward Mrs. Garver's, cursing under his breath, and vowing that he would leave Rawhide at sunup.

But he didn't. There was to be a dance and he would have another evening with Tess, a dance or two, even if she was with another man. Hal Bide remained, impatient for the long daylight hours to pass.

He made a strikingly handsome figure as he walked up to the lighted schoolhouse windows that night. He spoke briefly to some of the men he knew, his feet already tapping to the quick lilt of the fiddle inside. He saw Tess swing past the window, and pushed eagerly inside. The square dance ended just as he walked up to her.

"Howdy," he said with a flashing smile. "I'd shore appreciate the next dance."

"This is Slim Barker," Tess said, and indicated a slicked-up, earnest young puncher beside her. "He brought me."

"I don't reckon Slim will mind," Hal said quietly. "How about it?"

SLIM looked angry, but a trifle afraid. He started to protest and his eyes involuntarily dropped to Hal's tied-down holster. He gulped and miserably shook his head. Hal triumphantly swept Tess out onto the floor as the fiddle started again. She danced well, but her dark eyes sparked angrily and she wouldn't thaw under Hal's most dazzling smiles.

"Yore friend was mighty obligin'," he said once.

"Slim is a good-hearted boy, a hard-working cowpuncher. He's much too busy earning an honest living to learn gun speed."

"He was scared," Hal said bluntly.

"Of you!" she blazed. "He's heard of your killings and your manhunts. In a fight, he wouldn't have a chance with you. Who wouldn't be afraid of a lobo wolf, if he had no weapon!"

She swept off the floor, leaving Hal standing there. She took Slim's arm and headed him toward the door. As they walked out, Hal caught the puncher's frightened glance over his shoulder. Barker was afraid of him, but this time Hal didn't feel the usual little touch of pleasure because of that.

The next day Hal rode out of Rawhide and, for once in his life, felt that he had suffered a heavy defeat. He tried to dismiss Tess as he had other girls, but it wouldn't work that way. She stuck in his memory and he

couldn't forget her cutting words. He couldn't shake off the thought that, if things were different, she could bring a great deal of happiness to him.

He cursed, and tried to shake the thoughts out of his mind. He tried whistling, but the sound was a hollow mockery of his inner turmoil and he stopped. He rode, silent and morose, the whole distance to Pinto.

He stopped at the sheriff's office and checked over the new reward dodgers that had come through. There were some that offered heavy rewards, but most of the areas reporting were some distance away.

Hal stopped when he came to Arnold Gaegen's dodger. He looked at the square face with the bold, harsh eyes and the little half-moon scar on one cheek. The lawman noticed his interest.

"Shore would like to run across his trail," the sheriff said. "Some say he's holed up down this way. Five thousand dollars would look mighty good to me."

"Gaegen's in the district?" Hal asked.

"I figger he is. Some blasted bounty hunter downed Lobo Lawson couple of months back near Rawhide. Him and this Gaegen was mighty close all the time."

"The band broke up and scattered when the law got too hot," said Hal.

"Mebbe." The sheriff shook his head. "But Lobo Lawson and Gaegen was never far apart. Me, I'm keepin' my eyes open. But, shucks, it'll be just my luck for Breck Long to nail Gaegen in Rawhide."

Hal leafed through the rest of the dodgers, thoughtfully considering all the angles about Arnold Gaegen. He and Lawson had been mighty close in their bloody crime career, and some said they were sworn partners. Even if Lawson had hidden out alone down here, it would be like Gaegen to ride the vengeance trail when he heard of his partner's death.

Hal's eyes lighted. He would return to Rawhide and this time let the hunted man come to him. Besides, there was Tess.

He placed the dodgers on the desk and strode out to his horse. Mounting, he wheeled and started back toward Rawhide. He told himself he was returning because of Gaegen, but he kept seeing Tess Martin's face.

He returned to Mrs. Garver's and the genial old lady made him welcome again. Hal spent the next few days scouring the War Bonnets, searching in a wide area around the spot where he had downed Lobo Lawson, but he never came on any sign of Arnold Gaegen. At the end of the week he returned to Rawhide.

The next morning, while he was at the New Deck, talking idly to "Tiny" Tompkins about ranches and cattle, Breck Long pushed through the batwings. The lawman wore crossed gun-belts, the holsters tied down, and something in the set of his face swung every man's attention to him.

"Rustlers hit the Bar O," the lawman said. "I'm formin' a posse. Saddle up and be at my office in ten minutes. I'll swear yuh in as deputies."

There was a concerted move toward the door. Hal remained where he was, staring down into his whisky glass. Tiny gave him a searching look, shrugged his fat shoulders, and moved away. Breck Long, still beside the batwings, checked the fat man.

"You don't have to go, Tiny."

"Plumb ridiculous the way folks coddle me, Breck." Tiny sighed and grinned. "My old sway-back hoss needs exercise. Gettin' mighty fat, he is. I'll be at the office." He waddled out.

ONLY Hal, Breck Long and Dent Sturgis remained in the room. Dent had gone to the far end of the bar and buckled on a gunbelt and holster. Breck, thumbs hooked in his own belt, stared at Hal. He thoughtfully rubbed his hand along his jaw.

"I reckon yuh ain't a Rawhide citizen, Bide," he stated, "but yuh've had a heap of experience in things like this. Shore be glad to have yuh."

Hal shrugged.

"Yuh don't ask Dent to serve whisky free, or Lem Adams for groceries, do yuh?"

"Meanin'?"

"I ain't never yet rode a trail that wasn't worth my time. Like yuh said, I ain't a citizen of Rawhide and I ain't ridin' no long trail just for the love of it."

There was a tense silence in the room. Breck said nothing and Dent's square face was as dark as a storm cloud. He moved the length of the bar, picked up Hal's empty glass.

"The New Deck's closed," he said quietly. "It always is when the town needs my help. I ride for nothin'."

"Yore privilege." Hal moved from the bar. "I'll stick to Gaegen, and a five-thousand-dollar job."

"For a nice-lookin' gent," Breck said slowly, "yuh're shore mighty weak inside. Yuh got a heap to learn, Hal Bide, about how folks think and act."

Hal checked and his face flamed angrily. "I do as I choose."

"Then don't beller at what happens later," Breck said. "Ready, Dent? The boys will be waitin'."

Hal strode out, turned sharply to the left and headed for Mrs. Garver's house. He saw the knot of mounted men who waited before the sheriff's office, boldly met their harsh stares. He was right, and he knew it. No use riding a gunsmoke trail when there was nothing in it.

He had just reached his room when he heard the posse clatter away down the street. He stood at the window, watching them.

"Just a long ride for nothin'."

He threw himself on the bed. Something inside nagged at him that he had made a mistake. But he used cold and sound reason to beat it down. The possemen all had something to gain in protection of their homes and ranches. There was nothing in it for Hal Bide except the approval of men who meant little or nothing to him. He liked Rawhide and its people, but soon he would be moving on, and it would become just another name in the list of places where he had been. He sighed and drifted off to sleep, the inner nagging crushed and silent.

The posse returned with two prisoners they locked up in Breck Long's jail. They were practically amateurs, this being their second job, and they had bungled it. Hal was glad that he hadn't wasted his time on them.

He was glad, that is, until he walked into the New Deck. The moment he pushed through the batwings, a silence fell on the room. He felt a dozen hostile eyes bore into him.

Gradually the men returned to their games. As Hal found a place at the bar, men on either side edged away. He spoke to one and received only a blank stare in return. Hal flushed, bit his lip, and ordered when Dent came up.

The man served the drink without a word of greeting, accepted Hal's coin, and moved away. Hal tossed down the drink and crossed to one of the game tables. Four men with whom he had played poker before sat there. He spoke, pulled up a chair. One of them dropped his hand on the table.

"This is a four-handed game, Bide," he said. "It's among friends."

Hal, half-seated, froze. His smile vanished as he slowly pulled himself erect. He stared around at the four hard faces. Red anger seethed over him and his hand slashed down to his gun. Breck Long's voice cracked like a whiplash just behind him.

"Yuh're covered, Bide! Get yore hand away from that six."

Hal whirled. Breck's gun was lined directly on him, and the lawman's face was grave and stern.

"I told yuh," Breck said, "yuh'd have to stand by yore choice. This is it. Rawhide never took much to hired guns, and none at all to bounty hunters. We believe in helpin' our neighbors, just as they'll help us in a tight. We take no pay, nor accept none. Yuh've never learned that, Bide. Might be best that yuh rode on till yuh do."

Hal took a deep breath and his lips curled. "Sounds like a sermon, Breck."

"Take it how yuh like. It's the way we feel and yuh play our rules or leave. Yore choice."

HAL turned on his heel and strode out of the saloon. He paused on the planked sidewalk, a sudden impulse striking him. He turned sharply, rounded the corner and headed for the little house across from the school. Tess answered his knock. She looked more beautiful than ever, and Hal felt a catch at his throat.

"I'm leavin' Rawhide," he said, and he caught the sudden pain that came into her eyes. It gave him more courage and he hurried on. "I been in love with you, Tess, ever since I first saw yuh. I've hung around because I couldn't ride off and leave yuh."

"But, Hal, I—"

"Marry me," he rushed on. "The Reverend Carter can splice us right away. I got plenty of dinero."

"I can't," she said softly, and all the eagerness left Hal like air from a punctured balloon.

She moved to the edge of the porch and stared miserably up the street. Hal came and stood just behind her.

"But yuh'll never want for nothin', Tess," he pleaded. "I got money and I'll make more. I'll keep yuh happy, Tess."

"You won't, Hal. The money doesn't mean much. You're fiddle-footed and restless. You're not dependable. A woman likes to

be proud of her husband, even if he's only an ordinary puncher. You're a man-hunter and a killer. I'd rather marry a man who makes only forty and found and help him build up something that we can both be proud of."

"But yuh love—"

"Yes, I love you," Tess answered. "But I can't accept, Hal. It won't work. Maybe you'll find someone else sometime who won't think as I do. She'll be the girl for you."

Tess turned and hurried into the house. For a long time Hal remained on the porch, his fingers aimlessly tapping on the rail. The inward nagging that he had previously beaten down, fairly shouted now in his skull. He felt leaden and dispirited, as if a great, heavy weight were in his chest. He moved slowly off the porch and down the walk to the street.

Back at Mrs. Garver's he packed again. He straightened once over his bedroll, thinking that of late he had done little more than leave, and come back to Rawhide. This time it would be permanent. He thought of Gaegen and the reward on the man, but he no longer felt excited about it. He thought of Tess, and hastily pushed those painful pictures away. Grim-faced, he tightened the bedroll, took a last look around the room.

He rode out of Rawhide, shoulders hunched. He heard the cheery clang of Yancy Clover's anvil and it seemed to be almost jeering. Rawhide was not for him—nor was Tess. They were not for those who trailed men for the bounties on their heads, nor for the puncher with the itching heel and uncontrollable desire to see the other side of the mountains.

Hal drew rein at the top of the slope, where the Pinto road curved into the first shoulders of the War Bonnets. He looked back at the town, eyes searching, hurt.

He thought of what Tess had said. His face suddenly lighted. She had not turned him down flat. She had given him a choice! His hand moved to his pocket and he felt the bulk of the roll of bills. He looked up toward the badlands of the War Bonnets where Gaegen might be hiding. His jaw snapped tight.

"He's not worth the dinero!" he muttered. "The money's not worth Tess' little finger."

He lifted the reins, hesitated. Rawhide did not like him and would show it in a dozen different ways. He would be roweled and angered a hundred times if he went back. But he thought of what Tess had said, and spoke quietly to the horse.

He rode by Mrs. Garver's, and by Lem Adams' store. He caught a glimpse of Breck Long standing just within the dark room. The lawman would be wondering what the bounty hunter planned now. Hal smiled, a twisted movement of his lips. He drew rein before the bank and strode inside. Tiny Tompkins had approached the door and the fat man pulled up short, his heavy jowls showing dislike.

"I want to see yuh, Tiny," Hal said shortly. "Be right with yuh."

He walked up to the window and shoved the roll of bills under the wicket to Paul Pace. The cashier looked up in cold surprise and Hal speared his finger at the money.

"Deposit it. If Tiny's got the spot, I reckon it'll give me a start toward a ranch."

"You won't like the hard work and low pay," Pace answered carefully, and didn't touch the money.

Hal's eyes narrowed and he controlled the anger that surged up in him.

"Deposit it," he snapped. "There's a heap of things I'm learnin'."

ACCEPTING the pass book, he left the bank with Tiny. An hour later he left Tiny's little office and the fat man had orders to buy what land he could within the range of Hal's money. Hal checked an impulse to go to Tess and tell her what he had decided. Better to wait until the thing was done. His hand brushed his tied-down holster and he laughed, turned to the New Deck.

A man was at the far end of the bar but Hal paid no attention to him. He grinned at Dent, who didn't acknowledge it. Hal indicated two places before him on the bar.

"Two glasses, Dent, two drinks. Fill two for yoreself."

"I'm not drinkin' with—" Dent began, but Hal checked him.

"I think yuh will, Dent, when yuh know what's on my mind. I made a bad mistake when I didn't ride with that posse, and I want to tell yuh I shore realize it. But there's more. Pour them drinks like I said."

Dent frowned, puzzled, then silently placed four glasses on the bar. Hal still only vaguely realized that there was someone at the far end of the bar—a puncher, probably, since there had been a saddled, dusty horse at the hitch-rack when he came in. The four filled tumblers stood before Hal and he picked one up, holding it toward Dent.

"Dent, this here is a partin' toast to a gent

that just died—and it was long overdue. But you and the rest of Rawhide and the prettiest girl in the world done shoved him off. Drink a good-by to Hal Bide, bounty hunter and dinero hound."

Dent's eyes widened, and his lips softened. He studied Hal closely, and suddenly smiled. He picked up the second glass and solemnly drank the toast with Hal.

"Now this one," Hal picked up another glass, "is to a new citizen of Rawhide. It's to a gent that's startin' mighty slender, but who will work mighty hard. This one's to Hal Bide, whatever he becomes, rancher or puncher."

The glass was to his lips when a rough hand seized Hal by the shoulder and whirled him around. The man from the far end of the bar stood before Hal, his eyes blazing, his face an angry red, except for the white moon-shaped scar on one cheek.

Hal's eyes widened. Arnold Gaegen!

"I been lookin' for yuh," Gaegen said. "Yuh killed my pardner."

He stepped back, a stocky figure with slightly bowed legs. Twin gun-belts circled his thick waist, the holsters tied low. His hands stabbed down toward them.

Hal dropped the glass and his own hand streaked for his Colt. He tried desperately to fade to one side as Gaegen's black guns swept up, but he was a split second slow, and knew it. Gaegen's guns blasted.

One slug struck the bar by Hal's side. The second smashed into his body, knocking him back against the hard wood. Gaegen stood like an avenging fury, killing madness in his glittering eyes. Hal felt his own gun buck, buck again. He saw the deadly wink of the killer's Colts and felt his left shoulder cave in. He hung plastered to the bar, gun-smoke blinding him, seeing Gaegen now as only a dim figure through the blue haze.

His own six blasted again and again, and Hal hardly knew that he himself pulled the trigger. He was deafened by the thunder of the roaring guns, and then all sense of hearing was gone. His eyes wavered and a film came over his sight.

Something fell to the floor but Hal didn't know what it was. His own strength was gone, and suddenly the sawdust floor flew up toward his face. He felt nothing and the big room of the New Deck spun madly, then funneled down into a whirlpool of darkness. There was nothing else. . . .

His eyes slowly opened and it took some seconds for his dull brain to register what he saw. Then he frowned toward the sunny windows. He had seen them somewhere else before—sometime. He lay in a clean bed and his body seemed without weight.

With a great effort he turned his head and saw Tess Martin. He saw a look of deep and heartfelt relief in her eyes and she smiled at him. She bent over him and kissed him. Someone moved behind her and Hal saw Breck Long and Tiny Tompkins.

"Dent told me what happened," Breck said. "I reckon yuh're lucky to be alive. Yuh know that was Arnold Gaegen? I've made claim for yore reward."

HAL felt Tess stiffen slightly and start to withdraw. His tightening fingers checked her.

"Glad yuh did, Breck," he said faintly. "But I reckon I've learned money ain't as important as I figgered. That five thousand will go to the town of Rawhide to be spent as the mayor and council decides. I want no more blood money."

Tiny looked distressed.

"But yuh need some of that dinero, Hal. I bought yuh a place toward Yerba, and yuh got to have a little more to complete the down payment."

"I reckon if we're gainin' a new rancher in these parts, that Rawhide can do a little financin'," Breck cut in. "I know how Lem'll think. Don't worry none, Hal."

Hal shook his head and looked at Tess. "I won't, Breck, not about the dinero. Right now I want to know if a fiddle-footed ex-bounty hunter has got a chance with—"

Tess placed her fingers on his lips and frowned.

"You're not to do much talking," she ordered. "The doctor said you were to be kept quiet and unexcited."

"But I can't—"

Once more her fingers were on his lips and her frown deepened. But Hal saw his answer deep in her eyes, and relaxed comfortably onto his pillow. Tiny's moon face beamed, and he nudged Breck Long, jerking his thumb toward the door.

"This ain't no place for a lawman and a real estate hombre. Dan Cupid has done slapped his brand around plumb careless. It ain't no range for us."

The two of them slipped out and there was only Tess and Hal in the room. Her kiss confirmed what Hal had seen in her eyes.

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 8)

pounds to 1,000 pounds and each man roped twelve.

Best time in the match was made by Crosby on his 12th steer, 21.8 seconds, but he broke his rope on his sixth and seventh, taking 108 and 93 seconds on them.

Arnold's best time was 23.4 seconds, but his total time was 420.8 seconds, as against Crosby's total of 489.6, giving Arnold a winning margin of 68.8 seconds.

This was the fourth meeting of these two veteran ropers, with three wins going to Arnold, one by default when Crosby was injured, and two on straight time.

E. W. Irby did the job of announcing the match to a crowd estimated at 12,000.

A California Show

The recent rodeo at Anderson, California, was a great show. Lynn Roycroft was the announcer, Mack Barbour was the arena director, Lois Lee was secretary, Joyce Turner and Lois Lee were the timers, Don Bentley and Carroll Brunton were the judges. The winner of the highest marking as the best bucking horse of the show was Tornado.

The winners in bronc riding were: First, Jack Sherman; Second, Marshall Flowers; Third, Dick Hemsted; Fourth, Francis Walsh.

Capt. Kidd won the bull riding, Walte Lowe was second, Buck Scott was third and Hack Lambert fourth. Lawrence Hill won the calf roping, Vic Matney was second, Carroll Brunton was third and Basil Brown was fourth. Vic Matney was best man in the steer wrestling, Basil Brown was second, Jack Sherman was third and Jim Hough was fourth.

Bob Pinneo copped the wild cow milking, Carroll Brunton took second prize, Tom Johnson was third, and fourth place was split between George Edison and Ross Dollarhide, Jr.

A Memorial to Burk

Clyde Burk, four times world's champion calf roper, was killed in the rodeo at Denver, Colorado January 21st, 1945, when a horse upon which he was hazing a steer in the steer wrestling fell with him. Now the Chamber of Commerce in his home town, Comanche, Oklahoma, has undertaken the task of building a suitable memorial to his memory. It will be a stadium and will be used for rodeos, fat stock shows, district fairs, roping contests, etc.

The project is being financed by donations only. Contributions have already started

[*Turn to page 102*]

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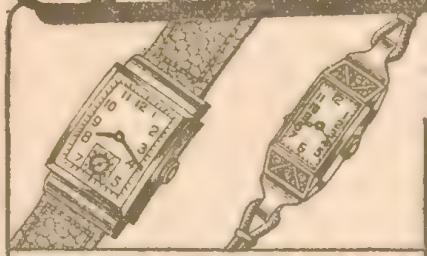

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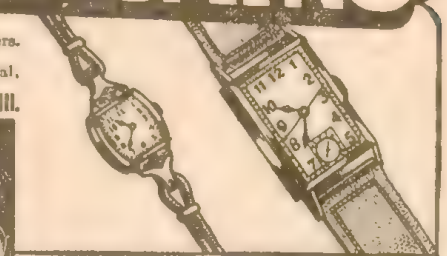

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coming in and construction is expected to start in the near future. Present plans call for a $30,000 plant, which will be called the Clyde Burk Memorial Stadium.

Jasbo Fulkerson's Accident

Rodeo fans in the East who are accustomed to attending the rodeo in Madison Square Garden will remember the fat little fellow Jasbo Fulkerson, who usually gets in the barrel in the arena during the bull riding to be tossed about by the bulls.

It was in this same act at the Fat Stock Show Rodeo in Fort Worth, Texas, this past March, that a bull hit the barrel so forcibly that Jasbo was partially knocked out of the barrel, and while his head and shoulders were exposed, the bull charged again, striking Jasbo right behind the right eye.

The rodeo comedian was rushed to the hospital and for a time his life hung in the balance, but he has recovered now. However, he has suffered loss of one eye. Still, his nerve is unimpaired, and he is back in the rodeo arena, keeping the barrel rolling.

The Title Race

The standing of the contestants in the race for championship titles in the season's Rodeo Cowboys Association point award system gives Bill McMacken the lead in the saddle bronc riding with 2,453 points. Jerry Ambler is second with 2,450 points. Bud Linderman is third with 1,646 points, Tom Knight is in fourth place with 1,602 points, and Buster Ivory in fifth place with 1,570 points.

Dick Griffith is leading the bull riders with 2,968 points, Wart Baughman is in second place with 1,574 points, Marvin Shoulders is third with 1,344 points, Bobby Estes is fourth with 1,306 points and Less Hood is fifth with 1,272 points.

Royce Sewalt is the leader in calf roping having accumulated 4,189 points, Toots Mansfield is in second place with 3,718 points, Everett Shaw is third with 3,594 points, James Kenney is fourth with 3,420 points and Dan Taylor is fifth with 3,000 points.

Dave Campbell leads the steer wrestlers with 2,942 points, Steve Heacock holds second place with 2,760, Hank Mills is third with 2,423 points, Rusty McGinty is fourth with 2,115 points and Dub Phillips is fifth with 1,977 points.

Bill Linderman is top man in the bareback bronc riding with 2,207 points, Sonny Tureman is second with 2,086 points, Paul Bond is third with 1,980 points, Wag Blessing is in fourth place with 1,508 points and Louis Brooks is fifth with 1,493 points.

Maynard Gaylor is out in front of the team ropers with 2,393 points, Chuck Sheppard is

second with 2,256 points, Gordon Davis is in third place with 1,771 points, Bud Parker is fourth with 1,771 points and Jim Brister is fifth with 1,606 points.

Rodeo Notes

At the annual meeting of the stockholders of Rodeo Fans of America held at the National Arena, Waverly, New York, H. M. Barnes was elected president, Foghorn Clancy is the new executive vice president, Robt. G. Hotchkiss treasurer, and Jo Newton secretary. The Rodeo Fans are a national organization of admirers of cowboy sports and have many local units or clubs known as corrals in various parts of the country.

The American Legion Post of Alvin, Texas, has launched a plan to build a memorial to the boys who made the supreme sacrifice in the last war. They have been donated two downtown lots, have raised some $15,000 by subscriptions or donations, and expect to double the amount through the staging of a series of rodeos. The memorial will be in the form of a building, a home for disabled veterans.

At some of the rodeos in Texas they are

[*Turn page*]

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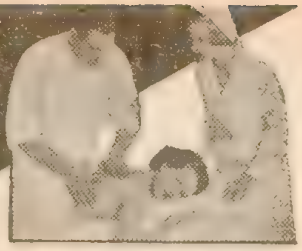

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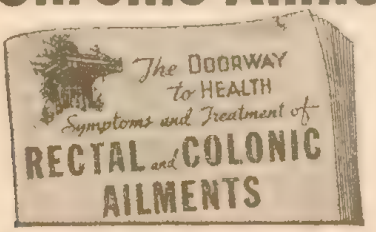

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using a new breed of calves for the calf roping contests. They are called Brajors, and have been developed by Warren Moore, well known cattleman of Alvin, Texas, from a cross between the Brahma and Jersey. The object in the development of the breed was to develop a Gulf Coast mother cow that would provide a greater abundance of milk for its offspring. The Brajors look almost exactly like the ordinary Brahma calves, and the jersey blood does not seem to lessen their wildness or fleet-footedness.

J E Ranch Rodeo

The JE Ranch Rodeo at Cleveland, Ohio, with Gene Autry as guest star, drew excellent crowds. Col. Jim Eskew was the producer and arena director, Howard Baker and Bill McGuire the judges, Mary Louise Eskew timer, Bob Matthews arena secretary, and Clay Hockman announcer.

The final results in saddle bronc riding were: First, Jerry Ambler; Second, Gerald Roberts; Third, Paul Gould; Fourth, Bill Hancock.

Jim Snively won the calf roping, Amye Gamblin was second, Dee Burk was third and Pat Parker fourth.

Frank Finley was top man in the steer wrestling, Earl Blevins was second, Larry Finley was third and Bill McGuire fourth.

Larry Finley was best man in the bareback bronc riding, Ralph Collier was second, Gerald Roberts was third and Jimmy Schumacher was fourth.

Buttons Yonnick won the bull riding, Delbert Wise was second, G. K. Lewellen was third and Gerald Roberts was fourth.

News of Rodeo Folks

Back in 1924 rodeo had its first lady bulldogger in Fox Hastings. After that a number of cowgirls took up the event but it soon died out so far as the ladies were concerned. It is now being revived, this time by a New York State girl, Smoky Forest, of Binghamton, who has taken up bulldogging and expects to give exhibitions at a number of rodeos.

Col. Jim Eskew of the JE Ranch Rodeo and Roy Rogers, cowboy star of Republic Pictures, have hooked up for three rodeos this fall. The first will be staged at the Arena in Philadelphia, the second at the Arena in St. Louis, and the third one will be in the Stadium in Chicago. They will be billed as Roy Rogers Rodeos.

A Canadian Rodeo

The rodeo staged by Col. Jim Eskew, with Gene Autry as guest star at Toronto, Canada,

was a great show and drew swell crowds. The judges were Steve Heacock and Ole Rice. Bob Matthews was the arena secretary and Clay Hockman the announcer. The final results in the saddle bronc riding contest were: First, Jerry Ambler; Second and Third, split between Gerald Roberts and Claude Morris; Fourth, split between Gene Pruitt and G. K. Lewellen.

Jim Snively won the calf roping, Bill Hancock was second, Irby Mundy was third and Jim Eskew, Jr., fourth. Jim Whiteman was best man in the steer wrestling, Clayton Hart was second, with third and fourth split between Claude Morris and Mike Fisher.

Paul Bond won the bareback bronc riding, Carl Williams was second, Jimmy Sloan and Ralph Collier split third and fourth. Jim Whiteman copped the bull riding, Gerald Roberts was second, Red Wilmer was third and Delbert Wise fourth.

Well, folks, I guess that about winds up another chuck wagon session, so I'll be saying *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

MACK JARVIS walked restlessly out of his feed store into the street. It had been months since he had quit riding for the Tomahawk and bought the feed store here in Axhandle. He hated the indoor life operating a business made necessary, but it was the only way he knew to make enough money to marry Rosella Wade.

A deputy sheriff, running along the boardwalk, called to Mack:

"Lou Kyle's setting 'em up in the Casino. He wants everybody over there. Says he's got a couple things to tell us."

It was like an Axhandle deputy, Mack thought, to be running errands for saloonman Kyle. Too, it was like Kyle to send out word he had something to tell, and expect everybody to light out on a high lope to hear what it was. What was more, they would. All but Mack Jarvis. He could wait and hear what Kyle had to tell second-hand.

Mack went over to the cafe across the street and ordered coffee. Inky Blair, a little fellow who published the town's newspaper, soon appeared. Inky and Betty, the girl who served behind the cafe's counter, were Mack's only two real friends in Axhandle.

Betty wanted to know if Mack was going over to hear Kyle.

"I ought to," Mack said, "seeing as Kyle owns the bank and the bank holds a mortgage on my store building which I can't pay. But I don't have much appetite to hear him blow off."

[*Turn page*]

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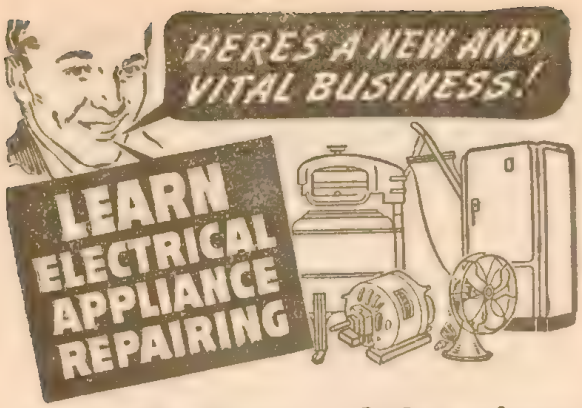

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Inky, however, thought Mack ought to go.

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"What yuh mean, decide one way or the other?"

"Yuh'll soon know," said Inky.

There were a dozen men in the Casino lined along the bar when Inky and Mac arrived there. Lou Kyle was in the middle, a blocky, black-eyed man driven by a great ambition that would never let him rest short of death.

An expression of malicious triumph crossed Kyle's face when he saw that Mack had come in.

"I'll make the less important announcement first," Kyle said then. "I've decided to go into the feed business."

A dozen pairs of eyes whipped to Mack and came back to Kyle. It was exactly what Mack should have expected. Lou Kyle was a show-off. He'd take this way of saying he was going to put Mack out of business, instead of using the bank to close him out, because it gave him a chance to perform before an audience. And he would put Mack out of business because folks would be afraid to buy from anyone else but Kyle.

"Now here's the real announcement," Kyle went on, "and I don't mind saying I'm the luckiest gent alive. I'm happy to announce my engagement to Miss Rosella Wade."

There was a moment of silence. A coldness ruled Mack then. Kyle was not only going to put him out of business, but he was taking away the girl Mack loved. However deep he was hurt, he'd never let Kyle see it. He stepped toward Kyle, lean face without expression.

"I hope Rosella will be happy," he said. "Any man who has her love is to be congratulated."

"She recognized a good man when she saw one," Kyle taunted.

There was a crescent-shaped scar on Mack's right cheek that had come from a fist fight with a redheaded cowboy named Metolius Neele with whom he'd ridden when he'd worked for the Tomahawk. In those days the solution of any problem had been easy. Mack had cracked the easy ones with a pair of fists, the tough ones with a gun. He fingered the scar now.

"I feel sorry for Rosella if she thinks she's getting a good man, Kyle," he said. "Yuh're a little man, and if yuh was honest, yuh'd admit it. This business here now is a purty fair sample. Yuh cooked it up thinking I'd crawl out of here like a worm on his belly. Yuh got me wrong, mister. I ain't crawling out of here for any little man."

Kyle could have made a fight of it then and there. But he chose otherwise. He waved away his gunman who was ready to step in.

He smiled sourly at Mack.

"I'll carry your good wishes to Rosella," he said.

"Thanks."

Mack wheeled out of the saloon, and turned toward his feed store. Inky, the newspaperman, was beside him.

"See what I meant when I told yuh yuh'd have to decide one way or the other?" he asked.

"Yeah, I see," Mack said. "And I've decided. *I'm going to skin Lou Kyle and hang his hide on Hade's outside door to dry!*"

This is the exciting beginning of THE RIDERS OF CARNE COVE, by Wayne D. Overholser, the fast-action book-length novel that heads the parade of top-flight fiction in the next issue of WEST!

Mack Jarvis knew he'd have to go to work immediately if he wanted to thwart saloonman Kyle's plans to ruin him.

"What are yuh going to do?" Inky asked him. "Fill Kyle full of holes?"

"Mebbe later," Mack said. "Right now I'm wondering why Kyle took a notion to go into the feed business."

Mack knew why Rosella had told Kyle she'd marry him. It was her dad, old "Soogan" Wade. Rosella thought a lot of old Soogan and he wanted her hitched to a

[*Turn page*]

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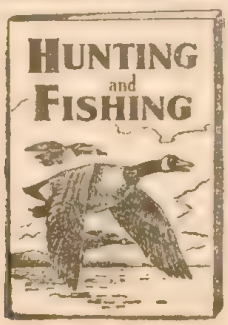

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lot of dollar signs before he cashed in. That was the reason Mack had given up riding for the Tomahawk and gone into business—so he could earn enough money to convince Soogan he'd make a fit son-in-law.

"I'm guessing the railroad's the answer to Kyle's going into the feed business," Inky said. "It seems to be more than talk this time. There's several surveying outfits along the right-of-way south of here, and it looks as if they'll start grading any day."

"And it takes a lot of horses to make a railroad grade," Mack said thoughtfully.

Deciding that if he were going to have competition in his feed business, he'd have to assure his source of supply, Mack saddled up and rode out to see the Carne boys who, in the past, had been his biggest hay producers.

The Carnes lived in a remote canyon, the entrance to which was blocked off by a high fence and a padlocked gate. They were a wild bunch, had no friends, lived aloof from everyone, and came into town only to get blind, roaring drunk.

Mack stopped at the gate to the Carne place, and a gun suddenly spoke. A bullet lifted his hat from his head. A second bullet breathed by within inches of his cheek. Hard on the heels of the dying echoes of the shots came the flat-toned voice of Cat Carne, the spokesman for the brothers.

"Don't try anything with yore gun, Jarvis. Get on yore horse an' ride like the devil sittin' yore saddle with yuh!"

When Mack finally explained that he had come only to see about buying hay, Carne snarled:

"Can't let yuh have none. Kyle's buying all our hay. Payin' us a dollar more a ton than yuh gave us last summer."

Disappointment was keen in Mack. The Jarvis Feed Store was done, he knew. He might still be able to pick up some grain and possibly a few tons of rye hay from the dry farmers in the valley below, but not enough to keep going.

He made a camp that night beside a spring on the Tomahawk range and as he cooked supper he thought over his future. When he heard a rider approaching, he was quick to kick out his fire. But it was only Rosella Wade. She told him that the Tomahawk riders were just finishing the round-up, and that their tally was short. More than three hundred head of cattle had been stolen!

Then a gun roared behind Mack.

"Don't move," Rosella whispered.

Slowly Mack's hands came up. He was thinking the gunman was Cat Carne, but the hard voice that came to him from the junipers was that of the redheaded Tomahawk cowboy he'd licked in a fist fight, Metolius Neele.

"I've waited a long time for this moment,"

Neele said. "Where are them cows you stole, Jarvis?"

The accusation that he had stolen the cattle was fantastic, but Mack kept cool.

"Got 'em in my pocket," Mack answered. "Wouldn't be no other place to keep 'em."

But when he saw the tight, meaningful way Neele held the gun in his fist, he knew the cowboy intended he'd never leave that spot alive. . . .

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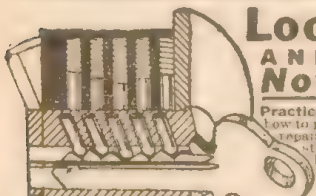

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I enjoy your book-length novels very much. The ones I liked best, to date, are: SPURS, by Gladwell Richardson. CALIFORNIA RANGER, by A. Leslie, GHOSTS OF GUNSIGHT PASS, by Lee E. Wells, and THE FRONTIER DOCTOR, by Bradford Scott.

Now for a couple of suggestions. Please let some fourteen or sixteen year old boy ride and work along with your hero in one of your book-length novels. Also tell Johnston McCulley to write his Zorro stories longer.—*Armand L. Robert, Romeville, La.*

Here's another reader who would like to read longer Zorro stories:

WAR HORSE RANGE, in the July issue of WEST, was the best story I've read in a long time. THE BLUE CHIP was good too, as was BOOT HILL ROAD.

In the Letter Box in the July issue E. R. Guest suggested longer Zorro stories. I agree with him. How about it?—*Foye Stacey, Houston, Tex.*

And here's a reader's complaint:

I just purchased the June issue of WEST from my newsdealer. I always enjoy each and every story and article, but—my gosh—this month Foghorn Clancy says he is in Houston waiting for the Fat Stock Show and Exposition to open. Didn't he know the show had already opened?—*Kirk Crosno, Vancouver, Wash.*

We're sorry, Kirk, to have slipped up on this—but you can readily understand that our issue was prepared in advance of the Fat Stock Show opening, and that Foghorn *was* in Houston waiting for the show to open when he wrote his department.

And, for our last letter, here's someone who has a novel suggestion about the Zorro stories:

I enjoy reading all the Zorro stories. I think it would be a good idea if you ran two Zorro stories a month instead of one long one. I'd like it better that way.—*Ivan Brannon, Cullman, Ala.*

That's all for this time, folks. But next issue let's have a letter from you in our Letter Box. Write today! A postcard will do. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks, everybody. See you next issue!

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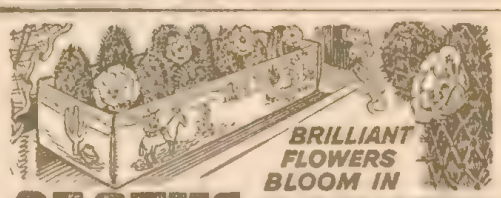

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fence again, tearing out two posts, and once more it was gone—this time packing lead.

Six months later, Bill flushed the bull again—this time fatter, bigger, and more dangerous than ever. As Bill Stone stumbled upon him in a mountain meadow, the bull lost no time in charging, and Bill went for his gun again to save his life. He pumped several shots into him before the Rock Springs maverick turned aside and vamoosed in the brush.

From then on the Rock Springs bull had it in for the 916 Ranch. The critter got over its dose of lead poisoning and took to luring cows and young bulls into the mountains, so that the outfit just had to go after him.

With the aid of dogs, the Stone boys finally found their quarry with a big herd of cows in a sparse growth of pine, and they hazed the whole caboodle toward the Rock Springs trap. The dogs kept the bull so worried that he forgot the horsemen. Right up to the yawning gate the bull went again, horning at the dogs, and then the beef animal halted.

This time, Bill had a lariat in hand while his father kept a .30-30 trained on the killer. As the bull whirled and charged, Bill's pony dodged, and the puncher dabbed his rope over the swinging horns. The next moment the bull hit the earth in a big sprawl. The outfit landed on him with piggin' strings and they had him dead to rights. At least, they thought they did, and they fueled up a branding fire. They ear-notched him, seared his flank, and fixed up a head-to-foot rope.

Bill cut several .45 caliber slugs out of the animal's hide for souvenirs before the drive to home range began. Then he released all but the head-to-foot rope tie and jumped back. It was well that he did, for that bull rose up with murder in its eyes.

Despite the fact the bull's head was jerked down at each step, it crashed through the corral gate like an atom bomb, splintering all wood in sight. The punchers leaped to horse and started after him as he ploughed into a forest. There was no stopping him. The Rock Springs bull went on through the trees to a point where the plateau ended in a 500-foot drop to rocks below.

Whether the animal failed to see the cliff or not is a subject of debate at the 916 Ranch. But the Rock Springs bull never halted. With its head being jerked by the foot-rope, bellowing its rage, the animal sped to the edge of the cliff and leaped into space. That was the famous Rock Springs bull's choice to captivity—a true maverick to the very end!

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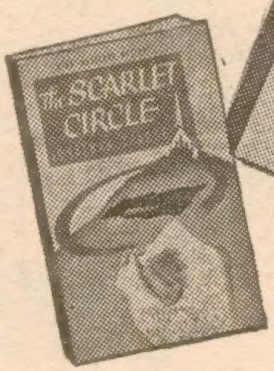

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